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CUTBANK

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CUTBANK SEVENTY-NINE

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COVER

Nanuka Tchitchoua, "The Birds of Wonderland," 2009.
Mixed media painting on canvas.

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44 TRUE THINGS ABOUT BEING GONE

1.

At the Ethiopian restaurant on Baltimore Avenue, I can sit at the bar and not be bothered. On Sunday afternoons, I watch the owner and his wife and two children in the corner booth, eating the spongy flat *injera* bread with their hands. I stand at the electric jukebox and watch the trolleys slide by outside and pick songs that remind me of home. I wait as long as it takes for them to come on. I can wait for them all night.

2.

I live now in West Philadelphia, where the houses are jammed up against each other so close they share walls and the porches sit in a line you can look down. At home in Viney, everyone I knew grew up on Viney Mountain and everyone was white. Here, there are many black people who grew up here, and a few white people who didn't.

3.

Where I live now, I pretend I'm a vegetarian. The craigslist ad said: *vegetarian roommate wanted for communal house*. I buy meat anyway, in Styrofoam rectangles, and hide it in the back of the freezer behind the frozen broccoli.

4.

A young black man lives in the underground apartment below the Victorian house where I rent a room from the vegetarians. We are supposed to share our porch with him, but mostly he sits on his concrete steps. When he sits on his steps and I sit on the porch and the wind blows just right, I can smell his weed and hear him talking on the phone. He is a PhD student and his father is dying.

5.

"Bonjour and welcome to Chez Lincoln!" says Fred, my boss. I

work at a coffee kiosk in an underground train station, serving people rushing to and from commuter trains and rich people who work in the glass office building that sits on top of the station.

"Yes, hello," says Five Shot Americano, a man in a sleek dark suit. "I will have a venti Americano with five shots."

"Excellent, certainly, coming right up, sir," says Fred in customer voice. "But unfortunately here at Chez Lincoln we have only pequeños, medio, and grandes. What size is right for you?"

Five shot Americano is already talking on his bluetooth headset and looks at Fred, annoyed. Fred rushes to the cup dispenser, pulls out one cup of each size, rushes back to the counter, and holds them up. Five shot Americano points to the largest one and Fred rushes off to make it.

"Five shot Americano," says Fred to Lea so she can ring the guy up just in case she hasn't heard the conversation that went on right next to her.

"Did you see Halladay just positively *demolish* the Padres?" Fred is saying to Five Shot Americano as I come back out with milk. "Fourteen strikeouts, I mean wow!" but Five Shot Americano is already walking away.

"OK guys, we really need to think about efficiency," says Fred. "For example, put a cup under the coffee spout and then hand it off to someone else to put the lid on it."

All morning we run around and try to manage the line that never seems to get any shorter no matter how much we haul ass. Men who are small or fat like to order the dark roast coffee that Fred has named "Black Gold" because it sounds manly. Guarding the espresso machine all morning, Fred repeats the Halladay story to every customer that is forced to listen to him while waiting for their drink.

At 10:00, Iced Dirty Chai comes and flirts with Lea on the register. Later in the morning, Medium Mocha comes by, a fat man

in his early fifties who also gets a scone and sits on the side. I get his scone and put it on a plate and give him extra butter. He's not in a hurry. He's a composer with his own keyboard. He says he's been writing songs about giving it one more try. He asks me if I play any instruments, and I tell him I used to.

6.

I use the public train station bathroom, and when I come out of the stall there's a homeless woman in a long overcoat lining up all her shoes along the edge of the sinks. In Viney, West Virginia, there was a man named Jimmy who sat outside McCaul's gas station every day and told Catholic jokes.

"Which ones?" the homeless woman asks me, and I stand there for a long time, considering the shoes.

7.

A woman with kind eyes and a crew cut comes and orders a large Black Gold and I feel like someone has jacked the lights up. She wears a blue blazer and a skinny tie and has nice shoes. She carries a messenger bag with a seatbelt for a buckle. She waits patiently in line between two men wearing suits the same color of blue as hers.

8.

In the tenth grade, I slept at Carla Daniel's house every Friday night until her mother made us stop. There was a plastic lamppost in the Daniels' front yard that shone through the blinds in Carla's room and made lines like prison bars on the blankets as we hacked away at one another.

9.

When Large Black Gold comes back for a refill around 2:00, she talks to me as I'm pouring the sugar from the box into the dispens-

ers. She works in the glass office building above the train station, for a company that collects body parts for transplants. She's in charge of the livers. I ask her about her messenger bag with the seatbelt for a buckle, and she tells me she bikes to work.

"That must be nice," I say.

"It is," she says. "And also harrowing. Bicyclists are the number one liver givers."

10.

With the money from my first month at Chez Lincoln, I buy a cell phone, a squat squarish thing that slides forward to show a keyboard with tiny buttons when you push it with your thumbs.

11.

I sit around with the vegetarians and drink their home-brewed beer. They are all thin, all runners, all working for organizations with the word "community" in them. Two of them speak fluent Spanish.

"How's your job?" one of them asks me, and I can tell she pities me, and the question stinks, a smell like something dying.

12.

I use my tiny phone to call Carla Daniels. I get a message saying the number isn't in service. I dial the number for my house, hold my breath, press the green *send* button. My sister's voice comes on, saying to leave a message for her or Mom, then a too-long silence, then the beep. I tell them I'm doing good, ask after them and the new horses Mom is training. Ask if they know anything about Carla Daniels. Maybe she moved? I'd like to write her, I say. I speak my new address out loud. Love you guys, I say. Then I hang up.

13.

I get a drink of water and stand over the sink. I feel all scraped out

but the tears won't come.

14.

I cook a small beef patty in an iron skillet that belongs to one of the vegetarians and eat it sitting in a lawn chair on the porch.

The young PhD student from the basement apartment climbs the stairs with a book under his arm.

"Oh," I say, startling a little.

"I have just as much right to be here as you," he says. Then a little softer, "That's my apartment down there."

"Right," I say. "Hello." He takes a seat in another lawn chair a few feet away. He looks to be a little older than me, maybe twenty-five, and wears dark jeans and a red hoodie. He's reading a big book that looks brand new. He's struggling to hold it open and still smoke his cigar. I finish my patty in a few bites and get up to go.

"Stay," he says. "You're not bothering anyone." I sit back down. I listen to the sound of a police car getting closer and then farther away. A low-riding Lincoln town car goes by, with a shot muffler.

15.

The boy from Viney who thought he'd marry me had a Subaru with a shot muffler. We tried to fix it with paste, but it still clanked.

16.

Large Black Gold is tall, possibly six foot. She comes around more and more, bringing a big blue glass mug for me to fill. One day, I pull a double shift, and she is waiting for me at six.

"You need happy hour," she says. "And you need it bad." I don't argue.

We go to a crowded bar in the fancy business neighborhood around the train station.

"I'm going to get you something good," she says, and puts her hand at the nape of my neck just below my ponytail.

17.

When you go underground, when you move, in a standard cab pickup truck, from your home on Viney Mountain to a place where no one knows anything about you, not one person, not one thing, when you really make a home for yourself there, alone, at the bar, it can be so good.

18.

At an Italian restaurant in an alley, Large Black Gold and I eat penne Bolognese with rosemary and heavy cream, and slices of mozzarella oozing fresh water and salt. Large Black Gold takes out bottle after bottle of wine from her messenger bag, and the waiter opens them and pours them into big, heavy glasses. Oil runs down my chin and onto my napkin, and Large Black Gold laughs. There is tiramisu, Limoncello on the house. I thank and thank the waiter each time he refills our water glasses.

19.

When we fuck, my fingers smell like coffee and places I will never travel: Ethiopia, Costa Rica, Sumatra, Chiapas.

20.

Here, in this city where you can't see the sky, it goes from light to dark and back again in the strangest way.

21.

Large Black Gold drives me home, a classy touch. It rains and she plays good jazz. My knees are pushed up against the dashboard of her old black BMW. The music is full in the car and the windshield wipers hit back and forth, and there is the brassy sound of a cym-

bal being hit lightly, over and over again.

22.

In front of my house, I consider her face, which looks straight ahead. I decide to tell her about the music. I tell her I used to play banjo, that I sing a little. Then I tell her that I left my banjo on Viney Mountain, following rules I made up, but now I'm sick without it. She looks at me, smiles, changes the radio station, and when I don't say anything else, she kisses me then sits back in her seat, waiting. I pull the door handle, put a foot on the cool blacktop, walk up the stairs to my door. But she doesn't drive away yet; she's making sure I get inside. Standing on my porch, with my key in the heavy wood door, looking at her wet black car in the tree-lined street, the simple fact comes to me, truer than true: this woman, she is, as my sister would say, going to fuck my shit up.

23.

"Craig," says the PhD student holding out his hand. This time he is already on the porch when I get there.

"Kendra," I say, taking his hand, which smells like Old Spice and cigars.

"You a friend of these girls?" he says, gesturing to my house.

"Not really," I say. He nods, looks back at his book.

"They're all vegetarians," I say.

"That's rough," he says.

"You couldn't do it?"

"I did it for too damn long."

"Guilt?" I ask. "Religion?"

"Sort of. We were Rastas. Rastafarians? Well, my ex-wife still is. That's how I was raised, but not anymore."

"What are you reading?" I ask.

"*Madame Bovary*. Ever read it?"

"Nope. You're a student, right?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"Heard you on the phone," I say.

"Creepy. At least you're honest," he says. "It's alright, I get to read a lot and teach and talk to people about ideas." He pauses, puffs on the cigar and lets out the smoke. "I guess you heard me talking about my dad then, too?"

"Yeah."

He nods. "He has cirrhosis of the liver. Do you know what that is?"

"That's probably the only medical term I know," I say.

"Someone close to you?"

"Everyone."

His cigar smoke wafts over to my side of the porch. There's a sound like a car backfiring, then the same sound again.

"Gunshots," says Craig, and we listen. "Come on. I'll fix you some breakfast. Sun'll be up soon."

"I should get some sleep," I say.

"I've got bacon," he says.

24.

Down in Craig's apartment, books explode from the laundry hamper, the kitchen cabinets, the floorboards. He turns on the olive-colored stove and heats up a cast iron pan.

As the bacon sizzles and the toast toasts, Craig tells me he has a seven-year-old son named Arnie who lives half the time with his ex-wife in their old house in North Philadelphia, where everyone on the block is Rasta.

"Why did you move?" I ask.

"I used to go with my ex and her mom when they went to get their dreads tightened," says Craig. "I sat outside on the bench

and read. These old guys on the corner would come over and talk to me about our people, about the revolution, about how empty and screwed up the rest of the world was. They told me it was good that I liked to read. They told me it was good I was smart. But the more I read, the more I didn't agree with what people were saying at the meetings and on the corners. I wanted to go find out for myself what was so bad about everywhere else."

Craig puts two plates on the kitchen table. He pulls out a chair for me and I sit in it. He hands me a yellow cloth napkin and spreads his own over his big knees.

"Where are you from anyway?" he asks. I get ready to say, West Virginia. I feel my whole self, down to the bone, spin again and again around one thought that is caught in the center: this life that I have today, here in this city, alone, I will not survive it. I cannot endure it. Not one more year. Not one more day. Not one more minute.

My cheeks are wet.

Craig's watching me. He puts down his fork.

"It's good bacon, but it's not that good," he says, smiling, and I laugh, and pick up a piece of bacon and swallow it, and then take another bite and then another, until there's nothing left on the plate but blue and white flowers.

25.

Fred's anecdote of the day is the story of a little girl in South Africa who had third degree burns over eighty percent of her body. The odds were bad, but her doctors used a kind of spray gun to re-grow her skin and save her life.

"These are amazing times we live in," says Fred to Medium Mocha, "when it's possible to create new skin."

26.

Large Black Gold's shoulder blades scraped against my cheek when she turned away, briefly, in sleep. She grows there, in my throat.

27.

Large Black Gold is only ever free on Saturday nights and Sunday mornings, and I spend Monday through Saturday afternoon holding my breath.

28.

I learn to hate my cell phone. Its small squarish screen blinking blankly at me. When I'm at home, I put it in a tin and put the tin under my bed.

29.

I start spending my afternoons after work with Craig. He reads me Willa Cather and Susan Sontag and Thomas Hardy, and I alphabetize his record collection. Then he smokes weed and reads by himself on the asphalt steps, but he lets me play any record I want as many times as I want to hear it.

30.

We go song for song, playing each other our essentials: my Stanley Brothers for his Bob Marley, my Bill Monroe for his Jimmy Cliff, my Del McCoury Band for his Peter Tosh.

31.

Craig's ex-wife drops off his son Arnie at his apartment one day while I am there. Arnie wears a loose-fitting embroidered shirt made of heavy cloth over his blue jeans, and carries a big backpack. The ex-wife is a short woman with dreadlocks down to her shins.

"You ever have locks as long as that?" I ask Craig.

"Just about," he says.

Arnie tells me he wants to be a city planner. On a slab of

asphalt that juts sharply up out of the sidewalk, Arnie builds a city of cement chunks he's picked up around our block. He's divided the pieces by size and put all the big ones in one pile and the small ones in another. Between them he's smeared blue Crest toothpaste.

"It's a river," he says.

"I see that," I say. "Where's the bridge?"

"No bridge," says Arnie, munching on a Cheez-It. "They have to stay on the side they're on."

32.

I buy a bike at a porch sale and clamber awkwardly on top so Large Black Gold and I can ride together along the Schuylkill. We go over the bridge that separates West Philadelphia from the rest of the city and she asks me if I see, in the distance, four small boys standing at the river's edge. I say I don't so she'll stop peddling and put her arm around me and point.

33.

A letter arrives from my mother, but when I open it, all it says is: *Carla Daniels left the mountain, joined the Peace Corps?* Carla's email address is written in sharpie at the bottom of the page.

34.

I email Carla Daniels. I tell her I think it's tricky, this business of moving away from home. I tell her I get confused, that reasons I left become reasons I could have stayed. I ask her to tell me one true thing about what it's like to be gone.

35.

The space where Large Black Gold lives in my body has settled down and expanded. It's moved from my throat and lives now somewhere just behind my sternum. There are other things stored there, and they're jostling each other. Carla Daniels is in there.

The boy who thought he'd marry me is in there. Also, the moment when you're sitting in a circle with friends about to play music.

36.

When Saturday night comes, I look for clues in Large Black Gold's apartment. It's clean. Brightly colored walls with nothing on them. We sit in her living room, watching an old Western on TV, and she puts her hand in my crotch. She touches everything there, and the blood won't stop flooding my body. I picture the curlicue f shape of the sound holes on a mandolin. She finds where one kind of skin stops and another kind begins. She tells me how I give myself away, easy as a book. I breathe out, all that weight. With Carla Daniels, what I remember is fear. Correction: what I remember is a mashup of fear and sex. Here, today, I feel something, way down in my gut. Not like sex. The word I would use is comfort.

37.

Osama Bin Laden is found and killed. Fred tells customers lines from last night's Letterman, the theme being what Bin Laden might have said just before he died. Fred's favorite is: "I need a house full of Navy SEALs like I need a hole in the head." He tells this to Large Black Gold as she's waiting for her espresso. She laughs.

38.

Large Black Gold calls on a Tuesday night, late, and asks to come over. The vegetarians are already in their beds. I sneak her up the old wooden steps of my house, the sound traveling through every floorboard. She takes her contacts out in the big tiled bathroom and looks at me, blinking, in her socks.

39.

There is the way Philadelphia looks sometimes, biking home late at night across the bridge. Below me, on I-76, cars rush east to the

city and west to the mountains. The lights of big office buildings on the water. There is the way all that light feels good on my eyeballs and in my body. I can get to thinking: this big gorgeous city, this is where I live now, this is where I live.

40.

Carla Daniels writes back. She tells me that it's good to be gone, and also, agony. She tells me it rains more in Cameroon than it ever did in West Virginia, but that the sky can go from sunny to pouring in ten seconds flat in a way that reminds her. She tells me that every day, in the small village where she is stationed with the Peace Corps, she climbs the Moabi tree in her front yard.

Here, she writes, is one true thing about being gone: I climb the tree to the top. I sit and pray to God. I pray that I will fall out of the tree and break something or hurt myself so bad that they will have to send me home. Then, I climb back down.

41.

"I don't actually live here," says Large Black Gold, over a nightcap in her apartment.

"In this apartment?" I say.

"In Philadelphia," she says.

"I know," I say. She knocks back the two fingers of Knob Creek and goes to sit on the window sill. "Where do you live?" I ask.

"A little bit of everywhere," she says. "Phoenix, Albuquerque, San Francisco, Madison. I go wherever the livers go."

"And I guess next you're gonna tell me you have a girl in every port? A wife and kid?"

"Not the kid part," she says quietly. We let that one sink into the air a while.

"Why did you even call then?" I say. "What am I even do-

ing here?"

"I don't know," she says. "I guess, I didn't expect you to matter."

"Because I work in a train station? Because I'm from a hick town?"

"Because I'm married," she says. "And when you're married, no one else is supposed to matter," and I go and get my coat.

She walks me to the train station, but on the way we cut down a cobblestone alley where people are waiting in line. The alley's pulsing. I can feel Large Black Gold hesitating as we pass, and in a few more steps she stops completely.

"I know things are fucked," she says, "but do you want to dance?" I say sure because there's more to be said and we haven't said it yet. I follow her down the long velvet-roped hallway and through one set of doors where the music's quiet, then another where the music's louder, then into a huge room filled with pink light. I take it in like a 360 degree windstorm – the giant white bulb above our heads that is shaped like a hot air balloon, the balcony that wraps all the way around the room, the electronic music that seems to come from the hot air balloon, the people every way I turn, and nowhere to put my feet. Large Black Gold takes my hand and pulls me toward the bar, and for the first time, as we pass by couples making out and men in suspenders jolting their knees in place, I notice that she is shorter than me. At the bar, it's so loud we can't talk, which is perfect, so I just let her buy me round after round and we stare out at the crowd. We switch to drinking shots. The room goes from mainly looking pink to mainly looking orange. Zebra spots and spinning stars are projected on the hot air balloon. The music changes to something with more of a beat.

"I love this song," Large Black Gold yells in my ear. I smile, but I just lean there. I don't owe her anything. She starts flopping her arms, dancing on her own. I start doing what I think is danc-

ing, or is at least the kind of dancing she wants. We do the robot. She grabs a hold of her ankle. We laugh.

Two girls come on stage, one singing into a rotary phone, the other on electric guitar. The singer's face is pale and a little fat. Splotches of pink, rash-like, sit high in her cheeks. My teeth bite into the thick shot glass. We get crowded into a corner, against a big speaker. We stay there, in the static. We want to hear and not to hear. We want to dance.

42.

And I think: this is how I will come to know people from now on, in cavernous rooms flooded with light.

43.

The girl is still singing into the rotary phone. She keeps perfectly still as everything else in the room moves around her. We look for any way up, and a man with arms covered in lions pulls us there, onto a kind of platform. We stomp on the floor like a last ditch line dance. The girl singers' flesh jiggles in the bright light. Large Black Gold gets down on her knees in front of the band.

"What are you doing?" I yell at her, looking down at this woman who can't give me any piece of what it is I need. And then I get on my knees too. It's called closing your eyes. It's called music. It's called giving of your whole heart.

44.

When I get home, Craig is smoking a cigar on the porch and reclining on a blue corduroy couch he's dragged out here. I'm drunk so I tell him everything about Large Black Gold, and he is too, so he tells me about his father who is now not dying, but dead, and his ex-wife who says that him turning his back on their lifestyle is one of life's few unforgivable things.

I ask him if he wants to go to the Ethiopian restaurant and sit at the bar.

"It's closed now," he says. "Too late. But there is another. I and I will go sometime." He stops talking, puts a hand across his mouth, rubs his beard.

"What?" I say, yawning.

"It's an old Rasta thing. You don't say 'you and me.' 'I and I' is what you say when you're talking to other people in the cause, other exiles. It means we're alone together."

I don't ask him if I can drive him to the funeral and he doesn't ask me if he can make me breakfast, but we understand the other is offering and also saying yes.

Craig lights another cigar and I take off my coat.

Down the block, a car backfires twice, then once more.

We sit there for a long time. We sit there until we can't hear any sound coming from the street but cicadas. We sit there until it's not pitch-black night anymore, but blue-black dawn. Then, we get up.

[DEAR MISSISSIPPI]

Dear Mississippi I had a dog once and dreams
I break hearts it is 9:06 wet December is a
red-shoe the wild grape has withered the
cotton fields are disced and dogs are stupid
they break hearts it is 9:06 sliding around in
a bottle of wine I keep thinking DC is the
south too Dear Nothing it's cold in beige
apartments when bellies don't touch Dear and
sometimes when they do Broken heart it is
December like wet shoes dreams pile up in
disced apartments red covers my dreams and
days run like dogs slide away in a storm

MARVIN SHACKELFORD

WIDOW

You agree there is ice in the soil in summer,
you agree deeper still the earth
shifts liquid, and we agree when I die
you will not grow thin, dry like
antiquated farm equipment, but you will not

marry any man who lives on our street, either.
At church you will wear black, then blue,
then you will change congregations.
You'll not name a cat after me.
Drive my truck but by emergency.

We agree the moon is not romantic
so much as steady, a hole in the wall
from which a spider will crawl
to eat its mate, be eaten by its young.
You insist you've drawn

the short straw, a card of the wrong suit,
and I love you for it. But I ask
you to grow older than me and you can't.
I agree our bodies are unknowable,
and you agree I know mine too well.

TOPSAIL

We watched the beach roll over on itself
before my aunt turned to coke,
turned up mug-shot in newspapers.
I was seven, and she and her three
lovely stepdaughters sent me up and down
the steps of our rented timeshare
just out of sight of the water.
We were always out of sight of the water.

They told me what they wanted
by color, and I would carry up from the line
small scraps of sunbleached, wind-dried
clothing so they could skinny into them,
throw on a t-shirt, head for the waves.
My dick got hard, my fingers just
pressed into things I didn't understand
but knew I wanted, needed.

Years later when they were lost
to bad boyfriends, a suicided father,
ripple and swell of divorce—all of them,
long gone—I remember mostly the sand
along the edges of the street. How we skipped
barefoot across the pavement, bubbling
of the tar for as long as we could stand it,
and then back into the sandy, weak grass

to cool again while we walked
endlessly toward the ocean.
Its break and rise, wind through
gulls' mouths drowning our laughter.
My aunt looking over her shoulder
while those girls of hers paired up,
surrounded me, took turns
ferrying me across the last of the streets.

NASTY

I'm loitering in the dark with two strangers, Dominican brothers fishing at India Point Park on the waterfront of Providence, Rhode Island. All in our twenties, we watch, momentarily, as a stray tabby cat and its streetlight shadow explore a yawning hole in a rusted-out garbage can. The head of Narragansett Bay, the state's lifeblood, stretches behind us. Orange and white lights waver at its edge. Suddenly, the younger brother—Eduardo is his name—has something on his line, and we turn back to the water. His hands leave his pockets and fumble for the rod as it rattles against the railing.

"A small one," Eduardo says, after the initial jolt, disappointment in his voice and shoulders. "Another schoolie." But I'm always curious to see a fish.

His line swerves, trembles. It glints in the periphery of the park's glow, cutting across the black of the bay. Eduardo draws up and reels, turning slightly on his hips. His catch thrashes as it approaches. We hear anonymous splashes. Then quiet. I think it's lost, but it's only gone deep. One final dive before the rush to surface.

When the water breaks again, Eduardo raises an American eel: roughly two and a half feet long; one roiling, arm-like muscle. Small, but strong. Fighting hard. All resistance. The three of us recoil as it comes wriggling over the railing. Apparition. A glimpse of underworld. The creature is amazing as it panics, swirling and suffocating in midair.

We panic, too, in our way. "Fucking shit," says Alexandro, Eduardo's older brother, both amused and appalled. He and I skip back a few steps, clearing space, while Eduardo pushes his rod as far as possible from his torso. Rigidly, as if this thing is contagious, he cranes the eel over the railing and lets it drop in the grass.

"We got to cut the head off," Alexandro says. Good brotherly advice. On the lawn, the eel reminds me of a violin, alternately

shaping each f-hole as it flails. Back and forth, back and forth. Somehow, it's also the string. But the eel is soundless, except for the swish of its body on grass. I am silent too, but for a few unconscious groans and hums. Like the brothers, I'm at once attracted to and repulsed by this creature; these emotions are as indistinct, from a certain distance, as the poles of an eel's body.

"With scissors?" asks Eduardo.

"Oh yeah, with scissors," says Alexandro. "For sure. These things ... these things are nasty."

He shakes his body, half instinct, half theater.

"Nasty!"

As if warming his hand over a fire, a man named Tommy readies himself over his rod. It's a cold early morning. He and a friend, David, are just off the night shift, fishing clam worms under the I-95 bridge that crosses the salty Seekonk River. This is the city of Pawtucket, five miles north of India Point, where the Narragansett narrows to a stone's throw. By mid-morning, the tide will ebb and these men will be asleep.

"Nah," Tommy says, relaxing again in his thick coat. "Just current." But, another tremble. A decided shake. David looks on.

"Never mind," admits Tommy. "There's something. But I'm going to wait." Sometimes it's best to let a fish hook itself. Let it swallow the bait.

"Pick it up," says David. "Come on."

"Nah, it's just biting around the edge. If it were large, it would take the whole thing. If it's a small one, I don't want it anyhow."

"Why not?" David asks. They haven't hooked even a small one this morning. So Tommy sets it, with a swift, pirouetting yank.

"On?" asks David.

"Yup. But it's baby."

It's an eel, actually. A glistening yellow belly, a slate-green back. Tommy lifts it from the water and lets it down in the dirt below the bridge. We watch it roll, in frantic waves. David gives a hoot and pretends to run away, lifting his knees high as if in fright. The fish has swallowed the hook entirely; thin, clear monofilament runs from its mouth like a tongue. No one moves to touch the thing.

"Just look at that," I say, standing with Tommy over the eel. Even on this foreign stage, the sheer speed, the sinuosity, of its athleticism is captivating, metronomic—an unfortunate misunderstanding. How accidental that this found Tommy's worm on the dark bottom; that the eel swallowed it whole; that such a creature evolved to root through mud, the nooks and crannies of the estuarine floor. It is an animated intestine. Watching the eel struggle, I long to see one on its own terms—an improbable wish.

"Will you use it for bait?" I ask.

"This thing?" Tommy raises his eyebrow skeptically. "Don't think so."

"That fuck'n eel is nasty, dog!" David bellows. He hops about in anxious excitement. He takes a photo of the fish with his cell phone and shows Tommy immediately, as if to verify its existence. Tommy squints at the tiny, pixilated image. Or cringes. Then he hoists the grit-covered eel back over the railing and dip its, letting us all breathe.

"It just wants to sink to the bottom," David says, lifting it again. The eel is clean now. Elastic as a bath toy. Reluctant to let his fingers near the eels mouth, Tommy slips on David's yard gloves to unclasp the leader, fish and all. When he manages, it dangles like a Christmas ornament from his hand. Like a stocking from its own loose end.

"Want it?" he calls down the railing, to be neighborly. Two other fishermen shake their heads.

"I'm gonna let it go right from here, give it a chance," Tommy says. He lets it drop. "Maybe the hook'll rust out."

Along River Drive, another stretch on the tidal Seekonk between India Point and Pawtucket, a man named Miguel, wearing sweat-pants and a white tank top, fishes with his two sons after dark. He has hulking, sculpted arms. The children spot a rat scurrying through the cracks of the riprap. The little one is afraid of the motion, the quickness.

"Do you like to fish?" I ask the older boy, as his brother plays with plastic toy trucks in the rutted dirt between the street and the river.

"Yeah," he says. "I don't eat them. But, yeah."

"Why not?"

"Um ..."

"You don't like to eat fish?"

He hesitates, rubs his throat. He's about nine or ten.

"My dad," the kid says, "he cuts the head off and the blood ..."

His voice trails off, like the words are caught. Too personal. Pulling his chin to his neck, the boy makes a face and raises his hands, as if to rid them of a thing they've seen.

"The other day, my dad caught a blue one," he goes on. He means a bluefish, which is what people primarily fish for on the Seekonk River. That, and striped bass. "Right away, he cut the head," says the boy. "I don't like to see. It's nasty. "

Twenty minutes later, Miguel drags a petite eel through the reeds of the shallows, the smallest I've ever seen at the end of a line. The kids move in to take part in the landing. I follow, too. A friend of Miguel's helps hold it, as the children and I watch, wide-eyed. Deep in its throat, bulging, is the hook, like the lump of a mouse in a snake.

"Guys," Miguel says firmly, "go over there for a second."

The older boy looks to his father. Then he puts his arm around his younger brother and leads him away. They wander down the bank, reluctant, eyes trailing.

Slipping a pocketknife from his baggy sweats, Miguel stabs the eel beneath its peanut-shell jaw. Blood runs black in the dim light down his strong hands. The fish slows. Stops. With a pull, Miguel removes the hook and strides off after his boys, while his friend wraps the small, glistening eel in a rectangle of used tinfoil, carefully folding the crinkled silver over its pencil-body and crimping the edges.

The eel writhes on the grass at India Point Park. Eduardo, Alexandro, and I circle around. Three young men unnerved by a fish. Such power in form.

"I've heard they're good to eat," I offer.

Though true, these words seem absurd, ridiculous, in the moment. Eduardo and Alexandro are incredulous. How do you eat this shapeshifter, this slippery energy?

Alexandro moves to a picnic table, rifles through a tackle box. "Take it over there, under the light," he directs. Eduardo lifts the rod, dutifully carrying it to a bike path where he sets the dangling eel down beneath the electric hum of a streetlamp.

"You want it?" Alexandro asks me, in the sterile, florescent light, as he strides up with a large pair of scissors.

"Want it?"

"Want to keep it?"

"You won't eat it?" I ask.

"Hell no," Alexandro says.

"Too much work, anyway," adds Eduardo. "Too hard to peel off the skin. You have to peel it off like a sock."

A strange desire washes over me. It is long, like an arrow, with a translucent, narrow dorsal fin for fletching. Thin, fan-like

pectorals hang as if vestigial from the eel's sides. A moment ago, it was an undulating ribbon in the bay. Now it swims in place, on pavement. Briefly, I imagine taking this fish home with me. I could coil it in a glass pie plate, slide it into the oven and, bite after salty bite, devour it with fork and knife. Or, I could slip it into my housemates' beds: Surprise, guys.

"No," I answer, finally. "I won't eat it." But perhaps that would do right by this eel: to be consumed, like the normal fish; to be included in the rituals that bear us along—eating, touching with bare hands.

As the brothers talk out a plan, sand on the path scours the protective film of the eel's skin and sticks. Eduardo then steps on it, pinning it down. Scissors in hand, Alexandro kneels. The hook is large and juts menacingly from its lip. I steel myself.

But when he begins, Alexandro uses the tool like pliers to pry out the hook. He spares this fish, though perhaps its crucial moment has already passed. As Alexandro struggles quietly, red glazes the raised pebbles of the concrete in visible spurts.

When the hook finally retreats, and the eel is released from its hold, it signs a frantic figure eight in rapid stages, first S-ing one way, then the other, over and over. It reverberates like a windmill—the type that resembles a giant eggbeater, blades whirring on a vertical axis. It rotates, rotates, rotates, while there's still breeze.

Eduardo scavenges a paper napkin from the grass nearby. Bending, he grasps the eel's neck and walks briskly toward Naragansett Bay with an outstretched arm. Short of the railing, he stops. He straddles his legs, draws the fish back and, as if a kid flinging a branch alone in a forest, lets go. The eel swings end over end, and cracks somewhere below on the water. The white napkin returns to the ground in a flutter.

I ask if it will survive, but know. They shrug.

We scan for signs. Only waves catching the streetlight.

"Now that's nasty," Eduardo says, pointing behind us. We turn, again. Back on the path, the tabby and another cat are on their haunches, licking blood under the light. Licking it all up, hungrily, beside the rod.

The first is severed six inches below its head. Iridescent black flies swarm both halves of its body.

The second is wrapped in lime-green fishing line, its tail tucked beneath a rosy towel beside a yellow Solo cup. Bits of broken glass adhere, and glittering sand.

The third rests on a rumpled scrap of black canvas—an old tent, I think, still with a few aluminum poles, left by someone homeless. This eel is a foot long, maybe less, and curled through the hoops of a six-pack's plastic.

One more: a perfect, frozen S. Two flies work its mouth. Its pectorals remind me of ears set too far back on a head, or of butresses holding up a cathedral. A nearby McDonald's cup mimics its body: tipped over, red straw bent at a wild angle.

Even in death, eels seem to smile. BB-black eyes. Tails like oversized butter knives. Their skin: leather on a dark sofa, tightening. Ribs beginning to show. Beneath I-95 again in Pawtucket, I find them together on the granite river wall above the Seekonk.

"They're nasty-looking, aren't they?" a passing fisherman says, suddenly disturbing my examination. I nod in agreement: not because they "look" or feel alien to us, but because they were left here, disfigured, to dry among our trash.

"If they wanted to kill them," he goes on, "I don't understand why they didn't just cut them up, throw them back into the water."

I nod. "Why not throw them back alive?" I say.

"I was here yesterday evening, and there was only one," the fisher says, nodding. "Three must have been last night." Eels are

most active in the elements we fear.

When I lift the first, the flies fall away. The eel stinks, but its rubbery skin is oddly gratifying to my thumb and forefinger. One by one, I hold them up, and let them drop. They sink straight and quick. It feels good to put them back. Maggot eggs float to the surface from their mouths in creamy clusters, like miniature bubbles. The flies circle back to attend to the wet stains, where the eels lay.

The river, I think. The river will eat the nasty.

KEVIN PHAN

[THE RUIN CHOIR]

Selection from My Life with Andy Goldsworthy

*"The landscape is often perceived
as pastoral, pretty, beautiful...
But anybody who works the land
knows it's not like that."*

- "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands."
The Telegraph (24 March 2007)

I moonlighted
as a maestro, asked Mother

Pacific: *won't you play
your liquid orchestra?*

When I heard her
ripped psalms I felt

no fear. I was a hum
& watchful set of eyes

in the night. I recited
Milarepa with a flashlight

& tended to swans
who enemies crouched

in the woods.
& Yes, I knew

soon or sooner
I'd find loss:

those ruin-choir nights &
(at dawn) more beauties

to bury. Lately, I raze
my fingernails (packed

with crud.) I rinse,
scour & repeat

& am reported missing
at the kitchen window

remembering the limp
weight swung

in a Glad bag at my right,
a splintered shovel

clutched in my left
whose edge I rocked

my weight onto
to open up

a place. Peeling back
one wing I found

two nicks
(where fangs had sunk)

& then that sound
dirt made

amassing
over plastic

[LETTER: ON THE NATURE OF CAMPING AT THE MARGINS (5 YEARS LATER)]

Selection from *My Life with Andy Goldsworthy*

*"You feel as if you've touched
the heart of the place...
I am so amazed at times
that I am actually alive."
- Rivers & Tides*

Dear Andy,

I've felt loose gravel rock beneath my feet
like the tide. Undulant tentacles of weeping
willows have frightened me. I've heard
the soft complaints of seabirds who dimmed
the sun. When sleep was shallow I gathered
no grains of rest. I thought every bulb burst
was to photograph my shame. To cling,
Andy, to cling to nothing is what I want
& love those things that time will bury soon

*

I am trying to learn to love.
I am learning to love our sun: a spasmodic filament
pulsing on a bright red stem. Monks, too,
I love & blue plums & bay leaves in cheap tins.
I have committed mantras to my heart
& sung. If I can love miniature wind storms
& fresh cow flop odors & wild greens &
evergreens... Or when I say hello. Hello

spiny dogfish, feather boa kelp, red sea
urchins, rhinoceros auklets... I know we'll share
the earth as our true home.

Autumn's eyeless ghosts creak high in flight
& my supermarket potatoes
grow eyes & fall asleep. I rest my head
on a starry blue pillow at the fragile margins
of autumn & when the wind rocks
the trees in her arms... I hear each leaf
unstitch—botched heart shapes
clatter down & enter the stream.
I'm entering, too. It's filling up.
The stream more leaves than stream every moment. I glisten.

Andy, you can come find me here,
at the river's margin hiding inside
colorful leaf mounds, the piles gently heaving
up & down with the storms
of my sorrow & laughter

COLLEEN O'BRIEN

IN THE DEMOCRACY

My father went to the mirror
every morning half naked
and scraped cream
from his beard. He flexed
both biceps, blue
plastic razor puny
in his fist. His face
half cream, half red
and clean, he made
a beast-face to make
me shriek laughing.
He believed
that he was joking.

FRAGMENTS OF A MONASTERY AT DUSK

The monk tells the story about the prairie
without touching anything.

Until he names the cloud cloud
sunsets fail, and rain never covers
fields and towns.

Until he names the blossom blossom
no one eats apples, no one sees bees
and nothing stings.

Years go by.

When he names the vow vow,
clouds move; blossoms fall.

He's out of sight, by now. It was a long walk,
a rough wind. The wheat parted
and left that great kingdom
on a clean blade.

CHRISTOPHER KEMPF

SKYPING

We must have suspected from the beginning
that the darkness we marked
with animals & objects & gods could be crossed.

Things will be different our ancestors said & meant
our children will have crayons enough
to color fire. Will lie at night

in the warm bed of their less-sadness & ask the stars for what the stars
will send them. Then,
you were that kind of bright, star-

heavy, & left me staring at the flight tracker in Terminal C. Screen
filled with leaving, each
plane a pulsing cross above the continent. I wanted

there to be, on each one, a box
whose job it was to whisper *I exist*. Just this,
over & over so I'd know. I know

a couple, you said, who spend
their entire lives apart. They put
the coffee on in their separate cities & flip

their laptops open to show each other what the sunlight is like. I like
to imagine them making dinner together in their separate
sunlit windows, the recipe a medley of vegetables & wherever it is

they live— the pinch of salt, the small talk. The coq au vin
steaming on the screen. In São Paulo, you lean
back in the radiance of 800 dpi. I ask if you want to, & we take

THE DAUGHTER RESURRECTED

our clothes off & are transfigured instantly into pixels. Into packets
of light in the sky over Miami. & I

am thinking again of that couple, of their love

like love, & how you will lie

beside me tonight in the whirring box of my laptop. I'll turn

you low, & we'll lie there

while its tiny light pulses off & on in the darkness

like someone breathing. Our bodies

like continents that were touching once.

THE DAUGHTER RESURRECTED

The mother sat slumped on the beach's chunky sand, daily, on a tattered rainbow blanket. She didn't wear a two-piece. She didn't toe the water. She didn't read a novel nor care about the sunburn that worsened day by day, turning her the color of a crab.

She watched the waves spit, and waited.

Moved her lips and begged, begged the nothing.

On the third day, sun hanging low and moon looming whiter than the sky's white, her daughter crawled out of the tide, seaweed tangled in her hair, skin periwinkle and waterlogged, veins highwaying her skin. Her dress was gaping with holes.

The mother stumbled across the sand and held her wet daughter close, shuddering. She blinked up at the clouds, watched the ocean uncertain whether to curse or kiss the ebbing. The foam left residue that reminded her of skeletal faces fading quickly into tidal sludge.

Her daughter said nothing. Her touch, it was icy, and her posture, it was slack.

The mother sobbed and drove the daughter home. The daughter dripped saltwater on the car seats and sat in silence, eyeing the trees that chopped by the passenger window with unblinking, bloodshot eyes. When the mother asked questions, the daughter vomited mud on her lap. The mother nodded, patting her daughter's stocking-hole on her knee – freezing and slimy – and said, just rest. You don't have to say anything. I'm just so glad you're here.

At home, the daughter stood in the doorway until the mother nudged her inside. She had to be reminded where her room was, at the top of the staircase near the linens. The mother showed her daughter the pink bookshelves, daybed and kitten posters.

You don't remember your room? the mother said.

The daughter sat on the edge of the bed and stared into the air.

The mother sat beside her. She picked seaweed chunks from her daughter's knotted hair. There was a lump in the mother's throat that felt real, a lump of words. She wanted to ask how it felt to drown, and where she went for three days. She wanted to ask the difference between the experience of being alive and not.

Can I get you anything? she asked instead.

The daughter drooled brown sand.

The mother left her alone, went downstairs to reheat some food. She found an electric blanket in the garage. She googled "daughter drowned and rose from the sea."

Zero results.

The father had been sleeping in the attic at his mother's house when his daughter resurrected. The attic was a room with sloping wooden ceiling-walls lined with life-sized collectible dolls called Colonial Girls. Since the drowning, the father spent most his time lying in his mother's futon in her attic. The peanut butter plant had granted him leave. He stared at the many still faces of enormous porcelain dolls around him, for hours on end, and his lips buzzed like a word hovering, never to be said.

His house, the mere thought of it, provoked unbearable nausea. His wife – his daughter's mother – made him dizzy with her grief and her talk of grief. And there was always the question of blame. Of who had fallen asleep first on the beach that day – her or him? It was both unknowable and unforgiveable.

Only today his wife called him promising a giant surprise, singing, come home. She said, our daughter walked out of the sea. He mumbled something about psychiatrists. Beep, said the phone.

He sat up and stared at the dolls and put his hand up to his throat, feeling the bulge-bulge-bulge of a pulse. His mother came up the wooden ladder, making it creak.

She pointed to a doll with her pointing stick and said, this

is a child-like replica of Queen Victoria, isn't she exquisite? The father, her son, didn't say anything. He held his hand there on his esophagus and squeezed until his mother told him to stop it, stop it right now.

When he awoke from a nap they were standing there like a breathing family portrait: his daughter, pale as a dinner plate, violet, in fact, with bleeding-looking eyeballs that did not blink. She was wearing what her mother always called her "Easter dress." His wife, standing beside her, appeared thinner than he remembered. She wouldn't stop petting her daughter's pigtails, which hung limp and unwashed. Even though his daughter stood directly in the ray streaming through the skylight, there was no golden halo that lit her hair's frizz. Behind it all, in the shadows, beneath a line of Colonial Girls and white lace, his mother leaned on her cane and shook her head at him.

He stood up in a straight line and stared ahead at his daughter, who didn't blink. His face was stiff with nothing. All over, he felt zero, because this was not real. It couldn't be. He was safe, wandering a dream.

But when he knelt, and reached out to hold her hand, and felt the chilled dampness of her skin like a noodle, when he pressed it and her bird-like bones and unflexing hardness of her tissue, when he saw she was there in front of him, red-eyed and slack-faced, with not a blink and not a breath and not a word, he recoiled and stumbled backward into the futon legs. It was his own choking that convinced him he was alive and not dreaming; his daughter was dead but standing.

It took him several minutes to regain his breath.

The first few days, the mother would not leave her daughter alone. She tucked her into bed at night, where the daughter lay with wide,

REBECCA ARONSON
WHILE I WAS ALIVE
unblinking eyes, her lips mum and shut and without breath. She did not sleep. The mother slept, snuggling cold flesh and blankets, and had vivid nightmares. The father slept in the other room, with the golden doorknob locked. When the mother awoke in the mornings, the daughter was where she had left her, only sometimes she was sitting up with her hands in her lap. If the mother said, "good morning," then the girl would gurgle. The mother fixed her breakfast on a plate, but the girl only stared at it, and when the mother spooned scrambled eggs into her daughter's mouth, she would not swallow. And there was sand in the regurgitated eggs.

The father, meanwhile, went back to work. I am very happy, he told everyone. A miracle has happened. I am just so happy. But at home, he didn't let his daughter sit on his knee. He didn't read her books or wash her hair. He waved hello and stared as long as he could at those red eyes before retreating into the bedroom with a drink or five. He had long, unmemorable dreams in empty, crooked worlds that starred a million blinking dolls.

Years passed like this. They celebrated birthdays with their daughter, but she didn't seem to change. She wore the same sized dress. Her hair never grew, nor her fingernails. Her face was rigid and unmoved. And when she opened her mouth to say something, it was only silt and seawater that spilled.

The father grew fat, his hair whitened, and he left one day, taking only his pillow, his television, and the contents of his liquor cabinet. He moved back in with his mother, who had since moved the colonial dolls downstairs, where she drank tea with them and read them travel magazines about cities she'd not visited.

"I knew you'd be back," she said to her son.

She poured him some tea. She seated a doll on either side of him. They had names and stories.

"I feel much better here," he said.

He plugged in the television and turned it on, and they

didn't say much after that.

The mother worked harder, traded the house for an apartment. She bought her daughter dresses and books, but the daughter just stared at them in her lap like they were alien gifts. The mother did the math: her daughter would have been of prom age by now. But no. Here she was with her, undeveloped, still wet and ice-cold.

The mother watched her own face erode in mirrors, the gravity tug yearly at her cheeks and jowls, her hair shock, strand by strand, colorless. Arthritis bloomed in her knuckles. She was not the same woman who had loved the ocean, had stuck her feet in the dunes and laughed and watched her pink daughter play. She needed reading glasses now to see her daughter's face. And if she peered closely, squinted her wrinkled eyes at her creation, zeroed in on the story in her daughter's pupils, the hole in the middle of the red, she saw nothing, cool and dark and lonely. But why complain.

Look at her daughter, forever by her side, staring at the wall. She would never grow up. She would never go away. She was so lucky.

REBECCA ARONSON

[WHILE I—BREATHLESS...]

While I—breathless
with aching calves—
slogged among dunes
two swift deer fell
and rose stagger-
less over sand
and lupine sown
back to life seed
by seed what
were they doing
at bay bared fear
on their quick flanks
if only eyes
wouldn't touch them
so and woods would
leap from gazes
and they into
that shaded sight
you said a whale
surfaced and then
another a
sleek phalanx
the deer too slick
salt spray and sweat
the shimmer light
keeps revealing—
as the feather-
balls curled loosely
in divots heads
tucked or missing—
egg-born? wind-made?
my heavy feet

earthbound as shells
pulling as if
movement were such
simple wishing
dodging feathers
and all the shore's
beautiful dead
 strewn currency
for the taking
or the leaving
 and all to say
we can bury
or burrow but
we will not be
not seen for long.

TELESCOPE

Through the glass brought close wavelets frothing
white under a white sky late day shine
late ache pulling all the strings homeward

on the beach a sea lion young lone
we worry of course motherless child
a voice calling would be lost in wind
salt-fogged windows obscuring vision

shrimp boats and small heads tilting under
resurface far later and away
sated fish in the belly of both.

SPIRITUAL DANGERS

General Objective:

The students will have the opportunity to discuss the writings of Aldo Leopold.

Specific Objectives:

At the conclusion of this discussion, students should be able to:

- 1. Discuss the environmental ethic of Aldo Leopold.*
- 2. Describe at least six happenings that impacted upon Leopold's environmental philosophy.*
- 3. Discuss the obstacles impeding the evolution of a land ethic in contemporary American society.*
- 4. Cite examples of how humans have moved away from a consciousness of land.*
- 5. Defend the value of wilderness.*
- 6. Explain the significance of "x" and "y."*
- 7. Discuss the lessons that can be learned from the Passenger Pigeon.*
- 8. Explain how one can be both an appreciator and a consumer of wildlife.*
- 9. Defend the need for a "doe" hunting season.*
- 10. Discuss the concept "Man always kills the thing he loves" as it relates to wild species.*
- 11. List five behavioral changes that they can accomplish that demonstrate a change in their thinking about the environment.*
- 12. Explain the significance of "Draba."*

Background Information:

A Sand County Almanac is one of those pieces of literature that has proven to be classic. Composed of an assortment of Aldo Leopold's writings, the book was not published until after the author's death. His career as a naturalist extended across four decades. In his writings, which were completed over time, one can see an evolution in thought and philosophy which occurred as he learned more about the natural systems in which he worked and recreated.... Leopold has and

continues to serve as an inspiration to many students and teachers of environmental and conservation biology.

This activity breaks with the traditional laboratory experience. It is the intention of the writer that the small groups of students typically found in the laboratory setting will serve to maximize discussion relating to Leopold's writings. This discussion should be student-centered with the laboratory instructor's role changed to one of moderator and discussion leader.

— Gary M. Ferrence, *Fundamentals of Environmental Biology*, 3rd Ed.

1.

The farmhouse sat near the bottom of the valley at the end of the road. The massive berm of the town's bypass route created an unnatural ridge, a hundred-foot high privacy fence that blocked through traffic, television signals and, my father claimed, tornadoes.

On this latter point, my father offered clear evidence. Not long after buying the property from a bankrupt housing developer, he drove to the farm with my sister. Storms rattled the windows, and the sky must have turned green. Turning onto Twolick Drive, my father and my sister watched a funnel cloud drift overhead. At the farm, nothing had been touched. The tornado rode the terrain, lifted from the hillsides and floated benignly past the decayed farmhouse that, really, would have been better off smashed.

For a year, my father drove out to the farm to make a home out of that house. Snakes lived inside, alongside rats, all of them unbothered by the fraternity brothers who had been the most recent human residents. Their beer cans lined the cracked basement floor, where beams of light cut through the loose rock foundation.

"Burn it down," my uncle suggested, looking at the house his older brother had joyfully bought. Let it be clear: it was a good deal. Let it also be clear: no one else wanted it.

When securing the mortgage, the local banker stared slack-jawed at the house my father wanted to finance. This was the main structure of the 100 acre parcel, the hearth, the center. It was intended, also, as the financial backbone of the deal.

"I can't write a loan for this," the banker said. It was just too rough, worthless really. No doubt, he agreed with my uncle. Better to start with fresh earth than suffer the labors of an impossible rehab. Plow it under along with the overgrown fields, then there would be something to work with.

But my father was adamant. He liked the feel of the place, and I think the challenge called to his soul. He refused to recognize the source of the melody, the sirens who wailed from within deteriorated plaster lath, who arced along the frayed cloth of knotted wiring, who slithered under the mounds of trash in the basement.

The banker just couldn't do it. The house offered no collateral, instead added liability. To write the loan, he looked toward the barn. The roof leaked, spider webs infested the ceilings, and the boards had long since weathered to gray. He nodded. Better than the house, and good enough for the bank.

2.

The rooster's name was Andropov.

This was the early-80s, when Ronald Reagan seemed to be on television every night, his face gathered in by the antenna rooted atop the tall pole behind the house. We had three channels, more or less, plus PBS. That only counted when *Sesame Street* was on. Reagan crackled through the television screen on every chan-

nel, no matter which direction the rotor spun our antenna.

Bzzz — thud.

The rotor dial hummed, static lifting to reveal only another version of his half-smile, my fellow Americans.

Bzzz — thud.

Outside, Adropov raged. There was no television in the chicken coop, and the rooster seemed oblivious to the momentum of history. He cared little about Reagan's future as Commie killer, did not worry about the Berlin wall, was unfazed by the weight of Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland.

Bzzz — thud.

He chased us, proud breast thrust into the air. His feet churned, striking the ground like a shoe against a dusty table. He ignored our yells, darted away from our kicks, came back with beak and attitude, one day cornering my mother who took refuge, not for the last time, in a hay feeder.

Bzzz — thud.

Eventually, Andropov grew old. My father's hands forgave no past. The hatchet might as well have been guided by Reagan's own imperative. Andropov abdicated to the stock pot. The meat proved too tough to chew, so we fed the soup to the dogs.

3.

There are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace.

— Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*

4.

While his students never shared the enthusiasm, my father made *A Sand County Alamanc* a fixture in his environmental science courses. Of the quotations he expected his students to recall, none carried more weight than Leopold's declaration of farm knowledge. At home, my father was just as likely to reference the spiritual dangers of not mucking out farm stalls. In many ways, I shared his students' hatred for the application of Leopold's philosophy.

I don't know when the idea for a farm occurred to my father, whether he experienced a passionate epiphany while prepping for lecture, or whether he really meant to refashion his impoverished rural childhood as a prosperous adult. Whether conscious or not, he bought the farm with the words of Aldo Leopold nearly etched across the barn roof. Not long after moving there, the family appeared in the Sunday newspaper. The article explained how living on the farm functioned as a daily lab for the conservation ethic of my father. A photo of me appeared beside the story, a grinning six-year-old holding out an ear of corn for one of the horses.

Of all farm chores, I hated corn the most. All winter, we ground the ears into chop for the animals. My father attached the fly wheel of an antique corn grinder to the spinning belt drive of his lawn tractor. A dented length of scrap gutter downspout channeled exhaust outside. I shucked husks from dried field corn, a task impossible to do while wearing gloves. My joints crystallized. My hands ached. The tractor roared endlessly. We seemed always to make chop in the evenings, when the early dark deepened the cold and the echoes of the tractor most effectively ground my soul.

5.

Skywise looked young, was old. His hair had long ago frosted to

white, though the specifics of elven physiology nonetheless made him appear childlike. In the graphic novel *Elfquest*, Skywise plays the part of sage, of sidekick, of elder wisdom to young, brash, foolish chief Cutter. Cutter's the hero, Skywise the voice of reason.

Skywise likes wine.

Skywise gazes upward and marvels at the stars: you don't get that name for nothing.

Around his neck, he wears an oblong piece of magnetic rock, called the lodestone.

Skywise didn't know this, but a lodestone is magnetite. A simple rock with extraordinary powers that seem magical, if you don't know geology. It's magnetic, so it works as a compass.

Skywise thinks his lodestone is a chip from a star. He dangles it from a rawhide thong to find the way for Cutter, for his tribe, for himself.

My father was a geologist first, before becoming a biologist, before buying a farm.

At 10 years old, I wanted nothing more in the world than to be Skywise. I yearned for wisdom, direction, the mystical gravity of rock. Like Skywise, I had no interest in being chief but always looked for the way. Skywise had a way with the ladies: also appealing to a 10-year-old boy.

6.

Downstairs, the sheep occupied the lower half of the barn. The flock was never enormous, maxing near fifty in ambitious years, and the ewes exhibited the placid blankness for which sheep are celebrated. Sheep live their lives in stupor and brief terror. Mostly, they mill around and bleat, but they panic when a farmer, say, bangs on a plastic chlorine bucket repurposed to carry oats.

Even then, sheep find it hard to hold a grudge. Inside the barn, the frothing flock hurtles toward the exit like a single fluffy organism. There, it faces the bottleneck of the sheep hatch, a trap door cut into the side of the barn with a chainsaw. Sheep climb aboard other sheep, shove heads deep into wool, clog the door like soggy cotton balls swirling down the drain. Outside, each sheep releases through the door and takes a few frenzied steps. Stupor returns in a wave three feet beyond the hatch.

Rams are different, driven by fury and a blend of machismo and Napoleon complex. Perhaps the burden of responsibility weighs heavily upon their thick necks. So many ewes, so many lambs, one ram.

That gives too much credit, since rams exhibit the kind of blind, lurid stupidity only seen elsewhere in isolated environments: fraternity houses, spring break, the MLA annual conference. Rams live only to prove themselves worthy of their position. Rams possess one single philosophy, centered entirely on self image.

Charley was our ram, a squat, dingy Cheviot whose wool seemed always tinged with mud. While the ewes called out with soft, plaintive, almost lyric voice, Charley employed the sheep version of a Bronx accent. Low, bored, a threatening blat. He surveyed the flock and operated with clinical, diabolical haphazardness. Often, he ignored whomever waded among the flock casting feed. Sometimes, he became sentinel, announcing at the gate his plan of defense. At his worst, he lurked. He blended in among the ewes, swam beneath the taller Finns and Suffolk like a fuzzy, hard-headed piranha. He had strategy, some modicum of guile to augment unabashed pissivity. He waited, watched, then streaked into peripheral vision as a knee-cap seeking missile.

After near misses, artful dodges, and an assortment of daring escapes, my mother finally ran afoul of the ram. He charged hard, a hundred and fifty pounds of churning ire. She scampered

into a hay feeder hung on the wall, safe but now cut off from escape. For an hour, Charley strutted back and forth. He dared her, talked smack, staked his claim to that space once and forever. My mother called out for help, growing angry and, no doubt, panicked. Charley had her, and there was nothing she could do.

Finally, my father heard the yells and executed a rescue. My father had grown tired of Charley's attitude. My father wore size fourteen steel-toed work boots.

For a ram, the charge precedes an expectation of impact. We've all seen that on the nature shows: majestic Bighorns rear back, clash skulls, repeat. It's how you sort it out. Charley streaked forward, and my father raised one size fourteen into the air. In that clash, when steel and leather met bone and wool, lay the epic of the pastures. Two rams now, one a tired old alpha protecting his human flock, the other a frenzied maniac unused to gauging size. There was impact, a thud, the force of the ram driven straight back into his own skull.

Stunned, Charley shuttled backward. He considered the fluke, weighed his options, and charged the boot again. Dazed now, Charley refused to submit. He gave it a third charge, manure flicking in the air under his whirling hooves.

As my father tells the story, this final strike changed everything. Charley felt the unyielding force of steel, could not shake the cobwebs from his now reeling skull. He bleated, something about anytime anywhere, then retreated into the flock, never to challenge my father again.

Before the county fair, my father had t-shirts made. Yellow cotton embellished with red felt: Cardinal Creek Farm. He assigned titles for each of us, arced beneath the farm's name in the same red felt.

He was "foreman," my mother "manager," my brother "shepherd," my sister "goatherder." I was the youngest, still little

and perpetually uninterested in the farm. I was "waterboy."

We took to the barn as a family to round up the sheep. My father backed the pick-up to the edge of the paddock, and my brother leaned a wooden ramp against the tailgate. Together, the rest of my family led a stream of calm sheep into the truck.

One ewe, an old matron, panicked. She stampeded, slicked out of the way when my brother tried to squeeze his arms around her neck. She slowed, caught her breath, then took off again when someone else came near.

I squared my body, digging my sneakers into the dried horse manure beneath my feet. She was headed my way, that old ewe, and I sensed my chance. My eight-year-old mind understood the alchemy of promotion. Catch that ewe, get a new title.

She approached. I can still see her black head, the dull eyes with rectangular pupils. The rest I remember as flashes.

The sheep.

The belly of the sheep.

The ceiling of the barn.

The ceiling distorted by tears.

My family couldn't stifle the laughter. Someone pointed to my shirt, perfect muddy sheep tracks striping the center of my chest.

7.

When traces of blood begin to mark your trail you'll see something, maybe. Probably not.

— Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*

My father honed the shears to razor edges. My sister handled them like an artist, pinching the metal just so, not too tight, or close, or

fast, or slow. The caked, brown edges of the sheep dropped into a growing pile of dingy wool. In such fashion, she sculpted the sheep to Davidian ideal.

Close-cropped, fresh-white, lanolin-slick, taut-muscled, prize-winning sheep.

The sheep cared little for aesthetics, cared less for the pinching whine of the shear's jaws. It kicked, sideways, sudden. The shears arced upward, then down. Like nothing, barely a pinch, they slid into Jeanine's bare ankle. They drove an inch straight down until they caught on bone. Yes, they were sharp.

My brother pulled them out, and my sister limped into the house, spurring a cardinal trail of bloody footsteps along the flagstone walk.

This was her most lasting prize, a permanent scar on her ankle that outlived the giant pink Reserve Grand Champion ribbons that waited at the fairgrounds.

From a window high above the city, Yuri Andropov likely watched Soviet troops subdue Budapest. Andropov served as the Soviet ambassador to Hungary, a position that seems redundant or, perhaps, historically dishonest. How does an ambassador function within a figurehead state, itself only nominally its own?

When trouble began to mount, the Hungarians staking a claim for themselves and their nation, the Red Army rolled. Even as they approached, wily or deceived Andropov assured Hungary's leader, Imre Nagy, that violence would be avoided.

Thousands died in the bloodbath, including Nagy, executed for treason.

Andropov ascended to direct the KGB, then took the mantle of General Secretary for the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1982 after the death of his predecessor, Leonid Brezhnev. Andropov died after serving a little more than a year, then was re-

placed by Konstantin Chernenko, who also died in office after little more than a year.

The infirmity of old men opened the office for Mikhail Gorbachev, who began unprecedented peace talks with Ronald Reagan, released the Eastern Bloc from effective Soviet control and, in the end, oversaw the end of the Soviet Union.

Hungary, crushed in 1956 while its ambassador watched, finally became an independent democratic state in 1989.

8.

Each year, my father bought a pair of feeder calves for the freezer. For a few months, they roamed the pasture and grew on a diet of grass, transforming from gawky, wobbled youngsters to full-on steers. They lived their last month as gourmands, gorging themselves on ground field corn and hay. The corn fattened them more quickly than grass, softened their muscles and added striations of fat. From the beginning, these cows were steak.

As with all farm animals, the final loading proves difficult. The truck arrived. One steer bolted for the paddock. My brother darted to swing the rear gate shut. The startled steer tried to change direction, stumbled, and a half ton of U.S.S. Bollocks ran aground, pinning my brother behind the gate.

The steer snorted away, and my brother swayed out. From the distance, I examined his shirt for track marks, just in case I could make fun.

9.

Desire heats a buck from the inside, a furnace kindled unceasingly by the proximity of does. A goat herd must therefore be separated. The buck must have his own space, which he will ravage with the battering of horns and desperate, longing blats. The buck is all fight and libido, bad attitude and horniness.

Outside, the buck roams the fence that sequesters him from the does, who ignore him, flirt not at all, and every now and then drive him crazy with estrus. In those days, the buck's tongue flits uncontrollably in the air, drinking in the chemical wind of attraction. He rams the wood of his pen repeatedly. He chews the corners. Withering funk rolls from his glands, filling the goat house with a smell thought of as goat but really is longing buck.

For sport, I occasionally chucked apples at our buck. His rage inspired cruelty in me, while lack of aim spared its effect. Tired of that, and moved by pity, or curiosity, or the awkward puberty of a farmboy — the business of sex fills the barn, but that's a business of infinite allure, mystery, and impossibility — I cracked open the gate to the buck's stall.

He'd been waiting, of course. He was always waiting. In a single motion of frenzied dry-spell, he muscled his horned head through the gap, rushed past me, and took to the nearest doe. He finished in no time at all, an efficiency easily labeled premature, and the buck stepped lively back into his stall.

The doe carried on with her day, a dollop of clotted cream still affixed to her tail, a how-did-this-happen birth fated for the spring.

10.

There comes a moment when the image of our life parts company with the life itself, stands free, and, little by little, begins to rule us.

— Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*

11.

I want to like Thoreau. I want to revel in his iconoclasm, his burning disdain, his arrogance. I want to stake a claim for myself in that admiration, to draw a literary line that establishes clear demarcation between father and son. He was a scientist. I am a humanist. He taught biology. I teach writing. Thoreau matters here somehow, perhaps because my father cares little for him.

Yet every time I prep *Walden*, I blur away from the language. I bristle at the claims: you're such a poseur, Hank. I hear myself making the shift in class, when my lecture moves from this-is-why-Thoreau-matters into something else.

"In wilderness is the preservation of the world," he writes. And I say, just how wild can idyllic pond-side suburban Concord be? I miss the point, but I can't help myself.

"In wilderness is the salvation of the world," Aldo Leopold writes, and there I find myself nodding. A simple change, just that one word. A shift from the static to the dynamic, from impending loss to potential redemption. Here, too, I prefer the catching of the sheep, or at least the attempt. Leopold squares himself in the mud, readies for impact, imagines himself wrestling the ewe to the ground. Thoreau leaves the barn.

I can't help myself.

In the mirror, I see my father's hairline denting the left side of my own part; on my face, I feel an expression form, and I know

it is my father's; in my mouth, I hear his baritone, his laid-back style, his cadence; on my father's lap, I watch my son play, and I see myself twice.

I can't help myself.

I read Wendell Berry, and I feel the gravity of the farm. I, too, want to redeem the marginal, till land wrecked by development, clear choking scrub brush, rebuild a leaky pond dike, replant native grasses, grind corn in the cold winter dark, raise organic stock before organic becomes trendy, renovate a ramshackle farm house. I read my father's life.

In class, I assign Thoreau, Leopold, Berry, admitting to myself that I am assigning my father to my students. On Thoreau, I pontificate. On Berry, I marvel. On Leopold, I stall. I can't find my groove, can't see beyond what I already know, can't help but wonder how my father would teach it.

On the farm, while my father worked to ready the house, I played. I was too little to do much more than wander like Thoreau — squish around the banks of the swampy pond, scuff through piles of construction dirt, climb up the barn gate. There, I liked to show off. Let go, fall back, then catch the wood at the last second. A playmate raised the stakes. He shook the gate, and I fell.

My elbow banged hard into the concrete paddock threshold. My father scooped me into his pickup truck, drove me to the hospital for x-rays, anesthesia, and the first of three plaster casts I'd eventually earn on the farm.

12.

I needed a farm identity, so I got a pig. He came tiny, just a young piglet who I named Skywise.

I'm not really sure why a pig, nor whose idea it was. I

imagine it was a youngest child's conscious but now forgotten effort to do something different, at least. A pig is not a sheep, nor a goat, nor a chicken, nor a cow, nor a horse. A pig was mine.

Every morning, I slipped rubber boots over my bare feet and walked out to the barn in my pajamas. I tossed feed to Skywise, who greeted breakfast with enthusiasm and, frankly, charm. He knew me, which isn't surprising for a pig.

Goats, sheep, even the romantic horse never really know people. They're not smart enough. They're purely animal, despite the hype. They respond to food, of course, gather and agitate and shove the rest of the herd aside. They become conditioned to humans, tolerate them, rely on them for their food and perhaps allow the occasional rubbing of necks. But goats and sheep remain always flighty, prepared at every moment to flee. This is a condition of biology, I suppose, a genetic expectation of predatory attack that prohibits peace. Horses, too, keep one eye always on the lions in the shadows. They fake it, exude grace, command, poise, stature. Yet there's no mystery why parade horses wear blinders. A simple flutter of wind, and the mind of a horse sees fangs.

Pigs, meanwhile, root around in the mud purposefully. They get a bad rap for the dirt, which is true enough; I usually wore a pair of pajamas only once before laundry became necessary. Pig zealots will call the animals clean, which isn't exactly true in a soap and shower sort of way. But pigs aren't particularly dirty either, gathering no more dirt to their body than the average farm animal. Wallows are a different story, but isolated to summer heat.

Skywise knew me. This is more than the naive application of emotion to a favorite pet. When I arrived at his pen, he acted differently than when others delivered feed. He was mine, and I his. At the sound of my voice, he squealed and grunted, rushed to poke his snout through gaps in the fence. I climbed in, squished my boots into the semi-solid ground of hay and pig manure, grabbed him around his pig middle and hugged. I am not ashamed.

He grew, as this is the mission of pigs. Skywise came to me at a foot-and-a-half, all snout and baby fat, easy to lift. Within six months, he outweighed me by a hundred pounds. Standing on his hind legs — which he never did, of course — he was probably a foot taller. We were still friends. I climbed into the pen, and he greeted me with the same enthusiasm.

The time came, as it always must on the farm. I went to school, aware that Skywise would not be there when I came home. My parents went out to the barn to lead him onto the butcher's truck.

His panic, perhaps, is the truest sign of his wisdom. He startled, refused to go where he was destined to end. I don't know if the butcher frightened him, tried to manhandle him in a way Skywise was not accustomed to. But he simply would not get on the truck. Maybe he knew, and I worry now that my pig sensed betrayal.

My father stepped in. Skywise was in full flight, however, and even this familiar person could not settle him. He charged or simply tried to evade capture, driving two hundred pounds of pig into my father's right knee. It buckled, and the bones separated at the joint. My father collapsed to the ground. He lay in pig shit, unable to stand by himself. Skywise retreated into the corner of the pen.

My mother snapped my father's knee back into place, helped her husband rise. They herded the pig into the truck without further incident. My father showered, put on a tie, went to work and lectured to his biology students, perhaps about Aldo Leopold.

GARY L. MCDOWELL

REPENT

because nature is a haunted house
because my kids are my religion

because who has time to make
ugly beautiful again, and who wants

to be known for what they didn't say
because why not, Fischl, my obsessions

aren't your obsessions, so because
even after all these years I still can't pray

with my eyes open because opening
my hands to grasp her pant leg

to stop her leaving because I don't lose

pennies between the seats of my car
because constellations indeed

because we had a picnic, joined the dance
among the leaves, ate sea salt

by the pinchful because we forgot
the tequila because given sunlight

let's plant the pyramids: all wit and no play
because deep in the mirror this morning

a face I recognized because

BARK BEETLE TRACKS

As we learned to read,
those strange, tidy marks on the page
bore little evidence of the cat's
stiff whiskers, or the smell the dog
left steaming by the road.

No hint of the fire off
mother's comb and hair,
or the smoke of father's breath.

Cold fingers of baptistry water
clutched our genitals
and drowned our eyes,
masking the big idea that love
was everywhere and baffling and good.

By the time we could scrawl
clumsy messages, heirs
to Plato, Moses, Seneca, we tried
to guess how puffs of smoke
a friend could see across the county
might announce "we're here"
or "the land is breathing."

Inside snug bark of paper birch
exploded by the splitting maul
are weird, truncated phrases,
wild, existential messages,
the signal, smut and poetry of a species.

CIRCUS

*Beauty with inner implications...
is beauty that makes an artist of the viewer.*

— Soetsu Yanagi

That was a storied summer.
Hawks were haggard
and the girls untamed.

I heard them before I saw them.
Round the bend
of a hoof-worn lane,
two women, nut-brown and naked
to the waist, wielding axes
in dazzling syncopation.

We do not want some stories to end
because the pause that ensues
will be endless.

We want the harrier hawk
to keep circling the rabbit forever.

We want there to be a next birth
when a child has died,
a next wife, next lover, next finch
for the cage left empty,
next pup in the house out back
with the wrong name over the door.

But a new story
will not end that silence.

These trees, those women,
my father and mother,
perhaps even their disappointments,
their regrets, will be reborn
—as paths in the garden,
as beardtongue and penstemon by the path,
as blue butterflies or clouds of smoke.

I remember them standing,
glistening, and also lying down.
They are good ghosts
and I am warm.

LIST

I dream and dream of loves.
A clip, a seep; ladder of inkfalls.
Direct address in the color which
 shall not be named.

See these proteins, dissociating
from the prisoner organism,
disengaging their tendrillicious
 limbs.

A time bomb in the sense of
 cumulative incendiaries.
The pestering territory, frontier.
Vision above the gap.

To lose the antagonism of worth.
A crumbling sill, its dust, each
embryo encircling like a mother.

Transmutation of mist, the
secular smell of commerce.
Encrustation, the elusion of blue.

Rugged subjugate and
sublimation; tortoise,
aphid, centurion.

The wing of the male mosquito.
(Glory) in extremis.

TERESA

for Teresa Veltkamp

Just like the burning out of a
light. A sudden fall, a squash
share. Reversal and reversal of
fortune, circling like an embryo.
Some have inhabited worlds, and the
rest live as aliens, treeless
landscapes, sandscapes and
ocean sunsets. Some
linger and some do not.
For you, it is like a cormorant
striking, and for me it is
like the silence of snowfall
where the flakes are bits of sun.

THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS

Elizabeth woke to the harp strings of her phone alarm and a hacking noise, as of wood chopping, somewhere outside. She'd fallen asleep on the couch again, and now the familiar room assembled itself—junk mail in the rocking chair, the Kachina dolls standing guard across the mantle, her mom's Catfight records framed on the wall, the two black disks above the album sleeves forming dilated eyeballs. The same disconcerting face that had been staring at Elizabeth for the past twenty-one years.

Before she thought about anything, she reached down her long underwear, into the warm place between her legs. A pain flared; Elizabeth plummeted. The thing had not vanished in the night, as she'd pleaded yesterday (let this be nothing!) in a way that approximated prayer. Not to God but to something like him; a blurry force or a sound, if she had to describe it, atonal and atmospheric, like the hum of a theremin.

She flung off the blankets and sat up. Through the bay window she saw the source of the noise—her mom striking a barbecue spatula against a Medieval-looking curtain of icicles that hung from the eaves, breaking the spears off one at a time. Without her swami scarf or hat her head was exposed in a way that still startled Elizabeth; she looked almost funny, like a big baby or a rapper, and Elizabeth didn't appreciate the joke the baldness made of her mother's illness.

Already she was in yesterday's clothes. She avoided the bathroom; tamped down her compulsion to look with the hand mirror again, didn't bother to moisturize her face or brush out the wedge of her bangs. It's nothing, it's nothing, it's nothing.

"You're up so early!" her mom said, stomping in the doorway. The cold had flushed her cheeks and ears.

Elizabeth shrugged into her coat and gathered her backpack. "Label stuff," she said, bending to lace her boots. "Before work."

She didn't meet her mother's eyes, or kiss her, as was usual, before she left—afraid that her mom might divine the problem before it had become, officially, a problem.

At the downtown free clinic, the receptionist garbled her last name. Frunczack was one of those Ellis Island mash-ups, the result of a ship's load of immigrants crowding a gangplank like paparazzi, a cacophony of languages while a secretary went around with a notepad and butchered all the spellings. This was how Mr. Sheridan (with his regular name) had explained it in the third grade. His intention must have been to arm her against the boys on the playground—"Elizabeth" they said regularly, but "Frunczack" they gagged on, convulsed the word from their chests and feigned vomit with various cafeteria props. Elizabeth *freak-hag* came in the forth grade during a P.E. softball game in which she failed to hit during a crucial inning. But these were only humble precursors to the rhetorical masterpiece born freshman year of high school—*Ejizzabeth Fucksack*, the playground boys (now woodshop bros) cat-called, sang, scrawled on any available surface like Neanderthals. It caught like a trend. Even Elizabeth recognized the genius of the tri-pun dis; the cruel lyricism, felt deep in the stomachs of all who recited it, like the best poems in the lang arts anthology.

"Elizabeth *how-do-you-say-it?*" the receptionist asked.

Elizabeth then—and now—was neither sack-like nor fuck-able. In the mirror she was always trying to lift her shoulders, which sloped like wire hangers beneath her t-shirts; she was aware that she scratched at her facial blemishes too often, and that her natural voice was not unlike the voice that one might use to imitate a Muppet. After that P.E. softball game Elizabeth had hid in a drainage ditch beneath Washington Street, drawing in the mud and singing fantasy songs about life as a runaway. In high school she learned to hide by other means; she lived in her headphones, and

ventured to all-ages shows, where she stood so close to the speakers that the music rang in her ears loud enough to cover the other sounds.

How, then, had an explicitly un-sexy Elizabeth come to be here? Her clothes in a heap on the chair beside her, the overhead fluorescence turning her skin reptilian, the exam table paper crackling under her butt?

A nurse came into the room and read from a clipboard. "Discharge, itching, pain while urination?" Her makeup—her fingernails—radiated hygiene.

"I—no—I found something in my ..." *Swimsuit area* came to mind. It was an old term, from summer camp.

"Genital region," the nurse said. An anatomical tour-guide. "Something?" she repeated, and looked at Elizabeth through rimless glasses.

"Like a *bump*," Elizabeth tried. She remembered yesterday; the hand mirror angled between her legs, her desk lamp shamefully positioned.

"A lesion or a canker? In the vaginal canal? Labia? Anus?"

Elizabeth felt hot and faint. "I'm not ..." It was in a non-territory, an undesigned fold. "I think it's probably nothing."

The nurse planted herself on a low stool and crabwalked toward Elizabeth.

"And you're sexually active?"

Elizabeth shifted and the tissue vest grazed her nipples, perking them terribly to life. Not so long ago, Julian had tested their pliability in his mouth. "I've only done it once," she lied. She'd done it twice. Once with Julian and before that with Boris, her Estonian coworker who'd manned the sandwich station at Squares. "A month ago." It had been two months before with Boris; fifteen days ago with Julian.

"You're a student?"

"No, I'm from here."

"No college?" The nurse frowned familiarly; *townie*, the frown said.

Elizabeth shook her head. "Not right now." Right now Elizabeth was devoting herself to Crossed Out. The burgeoning label, as her mother put it proudly. But Elizabeth stayed quiet; this didn't seem like the time to defend her extracurriculars.

"I think it's best we test for *everything*," the nurse said, as though she might administer an SAT, too.

Elizabeth did as she was told, put her feet in the stirrups and scooted to the edge of the table. Physically she remained there, but psychically she fell off; down, down, toward the regrettable memory of Boris. Her stubborn determination to lose her virginity, finally, at twenty-one. *Our* virginity, Boris had said in his stupid exchange student accent, emphasizing their shared purity as if this somehow fated the union. Elizabeth was less sentimental. It was disappointing to learn that Boris was as inexperienced as she; how could any real de-flowering be done by another flowery virgin? She arrived at his dorm room to find stinky candles lit and Enya playing, his twin bed neat and at-the-ready, Americanized by a *Star Wars* pillowcase. He unsnapped the legs of his tear-away pants with painstaking slowness while Elizabeth sat there trying to feel something. The mood stone in her core refused to glow, but by then it seemed too late. He was on top of her, his little flabs of boy-breasts pressing into her, his puppy mouth against her ear.

Something infinitesimal snaked inside her now, and she felt a barb-like scrape behind her bellybutton. The room seemed to balance for a minute. Her mom mentioned this sometimes, the calm a doctor's tools and procedures could bring. "At least chemotherapy *smells* like it's helping. Smell me—don't I smell like Lysol?" a feeble attempt to make Elizabeth smile on one of those miserable rides

home from treatment.

The nurse was asking something about monogamy now, about Elizabeth's *partner*. Julian appeared on the particleboard of the ceiling. She saw him on the stage at the Cinder Block, his Adam's apple protruding against the mic stand. "I don't have one," she said. To call him her "partner" might jinx the already microscopic possibility.

"Did you use protection?"

She felt the alien touch of the gloved finger, and again the sting. "Yes," she said automatically.

The nurse came out from the tent of her legs. "Are you sure?"

Elizabeth flushed. *It's nothing!*

"Because we have something here."

An hour later she was trenching down the snow-walled sidewalks toward work, hypnotized by disbelief. *We* did not have anything—Elizabeth had it, and the something was syphilis. In the recesses of her backpack, a white paper bag held antibiotics—antibiotics! She had rejoiced. *This was curable*, the nurse said. *But we'll have to wait on those other test results.* Relief came and went, and Elizabeth's insides turned stormy. *Other* tests, other results. Acronyms loomed large, bobbing on her internal whitecaps. *We'll be calling*, the nurse promised. She suggested Elizabeth's partner come in for his own tests, *A-sap!* And any other partners Elizabeth might have failed to mention.

She thought back—tried hard to focus and inspect the bleary image of Julian's penis, veering springily toward his left shoulder before he'd covered them both with the afghan. It was a fast glimpse, but she was sure that if something had been there she would have seen it; disease and the milky skin of Julian did not match up. No, Elizabeth thought, the syphilis had come from

Boris, the lying virgin. It was Boris she had not seen, in the dimness of the candlelight. Their sex had been like trying to strike a match with mittens on. The condom had bunched and become unworkable, and finally he'd shed it, tossed it to the floor with such authority that Elizabeth had not known what to say. To argue with the condom would have been to admit their sloppy execution of the whole endeavor. Their mutual badness at it.

An easy hatred overcame her. Boris was back in Estonia, but Elizabeth pictured him in his lame, square-brimmed hat, pressing a panini. In his retarded English, he asked, *What are you going after work?* Boris, who seemed capable of nothing but had conjured, somehow, this sore from across the Atlantic. And infected (probably!) Julian—Elizabeth's Julian.

He would hate her the way she hated Boris. How would she tell him?

Where the campus bordered downtown, she pushed through groups of students clogging the street corners, through so many nylon jackets and soggy Sherpa boots. It seemed crazy to be out among people at a time like this. She wanted to hide in her room with the record player on until she was cured. But her mom would be at home—and what would her *mom* think? That awful pity-look would shift across her face—that silent, expressionistic moan. When Elizabeth was in high school her mother had heard the signature nickname, for the first and only time, yelled by Damien Morris just as Elizabeth was climbing in the Volvo. Her mom had turned to her in the passenger seat—*Fucksack?* she mouthed, and the pity-look descended. She flung open the door with the engine still running. *You piece of shit Damien, you don't talk like that, not to my daughter, not to ANYONE! DON'T you smile—Does your mother know what a little prick you've become? Because the next time I see her*—and then she growled with frustration. She and Elizabeth both knew that the next time she'd see Anne

Morris would be on Sunday at Quaker meeting, and that was no place for the conversation she was threatening.

They drove home at first in silence, but then laughing, laughing until they were crying.

Ahead, the purple and ooze-green sign for Squares jugged crazily from the side of the building. Every time Elizabeth crossed the restaurant's threshold, she was reminded of its patheticness—and her own, for working there. Its mixed odor of Belgian fries and cheap disinfectant, the lidless vats of mayonnaise, her zombie-faced coworkers in their franchise-issued polo shirts. She had come to think of the job only in terms of numbers, of money earned and banked in her label fund. Now she made her way to the break room before anyone saw her. The schedule on the bulletin board proved that Miller, her manager, had been serious about last week's uniform infractions; he'd demoted her from the register to "working the corner," as they called it—soliciting in the freezing wind, waving coupons for rhomboidal waffles and corporate crepes and focaccia pizza. Even worse than subjection to the cold was the social exposure. *Two ninety-nine teriyaki Tuesdays!* she'd yell, the Ugly Stepsisters or T Rex or whoever blaring from one strictly-forbidden earbud, hidden beneath her hood. All too often the solicited person turned out to be someone Elizabeth knew, bundled and winterized beyond recognition when Elizabeth exclaimed the deal. Then her cheeks would thaw with embarrassment, she'd lower her leaflets and make awkward small talk. An hour later the acquaintance would walk by again, returned from wherever he or she had been, and the two would repeat the whole thing over—another wave, another exchange. The person had gone somewhere and come back, while Elizabeth stayed frozen in the same place. The metaphor in this was not lost on her.

It happened that day with Kayla Kaspers, the last person in the world she expected to see.

"*Elizabeth?*" Kayla said. She was walking a floppy black dog with a graying snout, and the dog looked up at Elizabeth, then back at Kayla, bored.

"Hey!" Elizabeth mustered, shoving the coupons into her pocket.

Her corner that day was actually the entrance to the old walk-through mall, where the winter sun filtered through the glass ceiling in perfect rays, and the yellow tile gave everyone's skin a photogenic softness—but all these tricks didn't account for the visual transformation of Kayla—this new Kayla—who stood before Elizabeth. As kids the girls had been semi-friends in the social margins. Kayla was cast out for the flesh-colored brace she wore to correct her scoliosis, and because of the Ren fair accent she'd adopted, inexplicably, in the seventh grade. And Kayla had a nickname, too—at a sleepover sophomore year, she'd exclaimed, *Black people love Jiffy Pop!* and her reputation as weird-girl collapsed into weird-and-racist girl—KKKayla—rendering her as untouchable as Elizabeth.

"Old friend!" she gushed, her voice less Shakespearean but still lilting, as if she were stoned or had reached enlightenment. She pulled Elizabeth into a hug and Elizabeth's cheek pressed against her floral hair.

After high school they'd kept in touch the way that people do, with quantum nudges across the cyber world, little thumbs-ups on pictures. Elizabeth knew that Kayla was at the New School for painting and that she lived in Brooklyn; that she had a sleek orange kitten named Thurston Moore, and that Kayla listed her hometown as Detroit, not Ann Arbor. But here was the three-dimensional evidence of what Elizabeth had distantly sensed, and it was startling to see that someone could evolve so rapidly. Kayla's waist squeezed into a heart-shape by her jeans; Kayla's Francoise Hardy bangs, straight and reflective as wire; and her foal-like eyes rimmed black.

"But how have you *been*? It's been forever!"

And her vintage red letterman's jacket. And her high-heeled boots that she didn't seem to wobble on. And, and, and.

"What's *new* with you? Tell me *everything*!"

Syphilis, Elizabeth thought. "Not a lot." She bent to pet the dog, who tolerated this without enjoying it. "How's New York?"

Kayla sighed. "Oh, you know, New York's New York." Kayla had a braggish way of talking about the city that made its excitement sound unimaginably boring. She listed the bands she'd seen and the museum exhibits, dropped the names of Brooklyn neighborhoods and restaurants Elizabeth half-recognized. A multi-layered envy was unfolding inside her. Elizabeth hadn't been to New York since middle school, but the idea of it had occupied her fantasies so consistently that she felt she'd already lived a speculative variety of lives there. When she and her mom talked about the future—those conversations that hinged on remission, as if it were a decided given—they talked about New York, where they might go and spend a fall.

Kayla put her hand on Elizabeth's shoulder. "We should hang *out* this week," she said. "I'll message you."

She wouldn't, probably, but it was nice. The gesture said *I like you*, even if it was a compromised like—*I like that I can impress you*. It meant that Elizabeth was someone worth impressing, and the thought was enough to make bearable the rest of the shift, the bat-in-the-cave feeling in her chest, the dread of Julian and her impending confession.

When Elizabeth first saw Julian Black, she assumed he was—politically incorrectly—a bum. This had been in the maze of Shantytown Vinyl, where she went most days after work to lose herself among the sagging shelves of warped LPs, the crates of 45s in their rumpled parchment, the precarious wall of as-is turntables and busted

speakers. He knelt on the floor, hunched in a voluminous army parka and flipping through the dollar bin. Elizabeth went to work on the Bs of solo rock because the As were right above the parkaed guy. Here was a Syd Barrett import, and she slid the record out to check it's condition.

"That's probably great," he said. "Never seen that before."

She jumped. The store was so much Elizabeth's place of refuge that sometimes she forgot she was in public.

He was not the person she'd initially thought—no, the enormous eyeglasses betrayed his hipness, the kind of thing only '90s talk show hosts wore. He was twenty-four or twenty-five, she guessed. A cowlick pulled his blonde hair back at the part. He smiled—dopily, beautifully.

She swallowed. "Yeah, me neither. It's an import."

"Where's it from?" he asked, setting down his own records.

"It looks Korean or something," she said stupidly.

"Here." He reached out for the record and flipped it over.

"What, you don't read chopsticks? This says Pink Floyd," and he pointed to one of the characters.

Elizabeth stood there seriously looking, but he laughed. "I'm just fucking with you." He handed the record back and turned again to his bin.

She had the impulse not to let him get away. "What'd you find?"

On top of his stack was a moldy Reggae compilation. "Oh, nothing really. Trying to get some samples of some really, like, *damaged* shit for this song I'm working on. Just to make it dirty or whatever."

Elizabeth nodded vigorously, knowingly. "Yeah, cool, totally."

"All the clean-sounding stuff that's happening right now" ... He whipped his head back in an abbreviated orbit, and a section of

hair swung out of his face.

"Yeah, I know, over-produced electronica," she hurried. "It's so glitchy. I think it's hard to actually, you know, *connect* with. There used to be a good garage scene here—"

"Oh totally. Fucking MC5? I grew *up* on that. And Iggy's from up the street, right? I just found this reissue ..."

He splayed his records across the linoleum to reveal the familiar pink cover of the Catfight EP. "Have you seen this?" he asked.

Elizabeth was stupefied. Shantytown displayed the EP at the counter, the first—and so far the only—Crossed Out release. It was a reissue, technically, of their first demo, recorded in 1978 just down the block, at a studio that was now a dog-grooming place. She'd Xeroxed and pasted the cover herself; an old picture of the band sitting on their amps, her mom in the middle with leather boots up to her knees, a Mick Jagger haircut, her eyes painted to look like arrowheads. Elizabeth had long been numb to the image, but now, in the setting of this boy's record pile, it was reborn. The mystery and magic of her mother's past struck her, as it had at odd moments since her adolescence. Here was her mother in the heart of her life. She was just about Elizabeth's age.

"Linda Frunczack," Julian said. "Babe."

Elizabeth laughed once; looked up at him, then down. "Yeah, she's my mom."

He—Julian—had a solo project that was kinda like ... and he compared it to a handful of low-fi, pseudo-tribal, psych-pop bands Elizabeth knew. Technically he lived in Philadelphia but he'd been touring for months, trying to garner some buzz before he released anything. Now he had a three-week lull between towns, and was staying with his old friend Rob G. Elizabeth knew Rob, too, sort of; he played keyboards for an instrumental band called White

Flag—and by the celestial connectedness of everyone (or so it sometimes seemed to Elizabeth—everyone excluding herself) Julian and Rob had grown up together. Somewhere in Pennsylvania that Julian called “Nowheresville.”

“Oh shit!” he said in the Shantytown doorway, pulling a flier from his bag. He handed it to her. Julian Black and the Black Lights. “You should come,” he said. “It’s free.”

Her heart thudded. “Cool,” she said. “I’ll see if I can make it,” knowing that it was all she’d think about for the next two days.

The Cinder Barn wasn’t a barn at all, but a freezing, badly lit warehouse out past the mall where a group of poli-sci dropouts held monthly shows. Elizabeth walked in as the last of Cannibal Con’s feedback whined out. Most of the crowd she recognized. She waved to Jenny Phillips and said hi to a group from the food co-op, two boys with matted dreadlocks and a girl with distended ear-holes wide enough to accommodate Coke bottles. But she stood alone, in a spot behind a cluster of tall guys in sweatshirts drinking from brown bags. As the Cons dismantled their drums, Julian appeared, wearing a Navajo blanket like a cape. His set-up was more complicated than Elizabeth had imagined—a laptop, sampler, and drum machine, a milk crate of effects pedals he and Rob G. unpacked and untangled. Two guitars and a Moog, which Elizabeth knew was pronounced with a long-o, should the Moog ever come up in conversation.

Julian put on the Fender and stepped to the microphone, tuning up.

“Check-check-check. Alright, let’s get started. I’m Julian Black, and these—” he gestured behind him, where there was no one, just the jumble of equipment on the makeshift stage and a half-dozen candles—“these are the Black Lights.”

Already she knew that he’d be good—he couldn’t not be.

A modest, tinny beat began, before he activated the laptop and the first song exploded into being. The guys in front of Elizabeth rocked on the balls of their feet. She could see Julian perfectly through a narrow slot between them. He turned to the Moog and tapped out a spacey melody that looped upon itself, then came back to the microphone and launched into a virtuosic guitar solo—the kind of performative shredding Elizabeth was a sucker for. The solo turned to fast, hard chords. His whole body vibrated. She was overwhelmed by the desire to touch him.

Halfway through the set he whisked the cape off and threw it into the audience. His bottom lip pressed against the bulb of the microphone as he sang, *Gina, Gina, oh Gina*, or maybe *Cheetah, cheetah, oh cheetah*. Savage yips and yelps punctuated his vocals. He howled for Gina or the cheetah to *please, please, cut your nails!*

A humble fantasy played out in Elizabeth's mind—she saw herself calling up Sam in Chicago, who would press five hundred seven-inches for two thousand dollars in cash. She imagined traveling there by train with Julian. Imagined a record release party; herself behind the merch table on his next tour.

One song morphed into the next. Elizabeth moved her shoulders without thinking. Her ponytail loosened and her hair came undone around her face. The crowd lost themselves in a reverberating calypso sample that built layer upon layer, while the distorted guitar whined relentlessly, and then Julian stomped a pedal and the noise ceased abruptly.

In the ringing silence, the applause sounded so unappreciatively thin that Elizabeth did something she never did—she hooted.

The crowd dispersed and she pushed through to the stage. Julian's back was turned and the guitar off. He took a long swig from a flask.

"Hey that was great," she said.

He spun around and pulled out two earplugs. Sweat coated

his face and his t-shirt was soaked. He looked as if he'd just slaughtered an animal.

"That was, like, really amazing," she said again.

He looked at her blankly. "Thanks."

For a terrible moment it seemed he'd forgotten her. Maybe he was one of those messianic musicians, she thought, like Brian Eno or someone, who lived so much in his own extraordinary world that unremarkable people simply flitted by and were dismissed.

But he set down the flask and began coiling a cable around his arm. "Some people are going to Rob's. It's fucking *dismal* here, right?"

"Yeah, totally," Elizabeth said.

"You wanna load up with us and then we can go?"

She soared. "Yeah, okay."

"Hey," Julian yelled to Rob, who was hefting an amp. "You got the keys? Elizabeth's gonna help."

In her euphoria, she had a synesthesiac vision; her name, glowing in Julian's mouth. He might as well have just sung a song about her, studded a whole chorus with Elizabeths, for how singularly noticed she felt in that moment.

In hindsight, it was probably the highpoint of their relationship—their friendship—*whatever* it was—before everything slalomed into surreality. At Rob's they'd abandoned the group to listen to records in the basement, where Julian was staying. Rob had filled him in on the Catfight EP, Julian said; he knew Elizabeth had put it out, knew all about her label project. "You're, like, paying for *everything* yourself?" he'd asked. "The pressing, the recording, the ... you know I do all my own recording, I just need some monetary backing ..." His words oscillated and slurred. Even then Elizabeth sensed that anything she said on the subject would be forgotten

by morning. She was drunk on whiskey from a coffee mug. He knocked over the bong that balanced precariously on an ottoman. And then he stepped toward Elizabeth and put one hand on her hip, the other in her hair, and kissed her. No one had ever kissed her like that—with their hands so undeniably on her—and it was cinematic and scary. Upstairs, people laughed. They lay down on the futon and a strand of Christmas lights turned them orangey; at first just their faces and then their bodies, revealed. The cat came over and flicked its tail perversely against her bare leg. *Are you healthy?* he asked. Her head swam; what did he mean? She was under-weight; she had not had a period in months. But she must have said yes, because something miraculous happened then: Elizabeth felt herself divide in two—the old her and this new, unfamiliar her, and the old Elizabeth flew off like a ghost.

It was dark by the time her shift ended and she caught the bus. She sat curled in the plastic seat, biting at a cold tortilla and scrolling through their minimal correspondence since that night. Two days after the fact, she'd texted boldly:

ARE WE FRIENDS?

Julian: FTF

Elizabeth: Haha

And today:

I have to talk to you

Julian: What abt?

Elizabeth: Important. 2nite?

Julian: whnvr

Elizabeth: cool

There wasn't much comfort in the missives; she had not felt "haha," she did not feel "cool," but now she was on her way and there was no going back. All day, time had been speeding up and slowing down with a sickening irregularity. Now the bus dropped

her and she moved up Rob's salted walk, onto the rime-slick porch, ahead of herself. The front door was unlocked.

"Hello?" she yelled from inside. Music, the Kinks, rose from below. She opened the door that led to the basement and called again.

"Down here," a voice, Julian's, answered.

Her throat restricted. She threw her boots on the pile of sneakers in the entryway and padded down the stairs in her socks, shaking out their fetid smell as she went. Here was the cave-room where it had happened—the walls of tacky stone and the calico carpet, the Christmas lights, the futon where, now, Julian and Rob G. lounged with their feet on the coffee table among a dozen empty beer cans. Julian had his laptop on his knees, and the cat was stretched out across Rob's lap. A third boy, whom Elizabeth didn't know, was positioned fetally in the nest of a Papasan chair, rolling a joint on the cover of a huge textbook, though the air was already ripe with smoke.

She looked at Julian and instantly her face burned. "Hey," she said.

"Hey," Julian said.

The kid with the joint glanced up at her, then back down.

"What's up," Rob said.

Just to fill the space, Elizabeth heard herself describe her day pushing chicken wraps.

"You should quit," Rob said.

"Yeah," Julian said. "Fuck that. Do what you want."

Julian cleared a space among the empties and set the computer on the table. "I could go for a chicken wrap right now." He stood and yawned, stretching his arms above his head so that his t-shirt rose to show the line of hair that led into his pants. Elizabeth felt it acutely—the pain between her legs. She could just leave. She could do this on the phone or in an email.

"You want a beer?" he asked.

"Sure," she said. She didn't. There was nowhere to sit, so she went over and perched awkwardly on the arm of the futon with her backpack still on. Julian's laptop was there in front of her, open to a grid of pictures: towering, industrial buildings at night in a snowy field, their windows garlanded with cyclone fencing. The façade of a bar—a chubby girl in a fur coat flipping off the camera. Rob G. and a kid with a neo-Nazi haircut smoking. A band—Wanted Widow, she thought she recognized—streaks of pink light and a double-necked guitar, the disembodied leg of a crowd surfer. Elizabeth puzzled it together—a show in Detroit, probably at the Dover Club.

"When was this?" she asked.

And then she saw Kayla Kaspers. A red straw between her lips. Then Kayla in perfect profile, talking to another girl. Then Kayla next to Julian, his arm around her shoulder, Kayla looking straight into the camera while Julian looked at her, both of them grinning wildly.

The pain moved into her chest, where it flared open and closed.

"Uh, last night? Night before? Fake Jamaicans opened, they killed it," Julian said. He set down Elizabeth's beer and plopped back on the futon.

The world felt rattled. She tore her eyes from the pictures and looked at him. "You're friends with Kayla Kaspers?"

Julian picked up the computer and scrolled.

"Oh, he *wants* to be friends with Kayla," Rob laughed. He made quotations with his fingers. "Fuckin' *waiting* to 'befriend' her."

She struggled to keep her voice even. "How do you know her?" KKKayla, Elizabeth thought.

The kid in the chair lit the joint and the air became thick

and close. "I dunno," Julian shrugged. "How does anyone know anyone?"

"What do *you* care," Rob said.

She took a long drink of the beer. It came to her that Julian hadn't told Rob about their night together. "I don't," she said smally. She'd left the morning after, retreated like an awkward dream, just as he was waking up. He hadn't protested her going.

Above them, the front door slammed and there were voices, shuffling. Steve Spinaker, Vickram Jansen, Ted somebody and Jenny Phillips filed down the stairs. As if they'd come to stage a reenactment; it was the same group from two weeks ago, from after the show.

Steve balanced a twenty-four pack of PBR on his head; Jenny carried bags of takeout in purple boxes.

Elizabeth knew those bags, those boxes, the burnt cheese smell. Nausea washed over her. So far today she'd taken three antibiotics—three times the amount prescribed. Now she felt a noxious fizzing in her stomach, as if all of the capsules had opened at once.

Julian looked concerned. "Where's everybody else?"

He meant the other girls. All of the world's other girls. He took out his phone and began pressing keys.

"I'm gonna go," she said to no one. She pushed up the stairs, past the group.

In her wake, Julian called, "Easy E—I thought you wanted to talk business. Have a cigarette—"

"Are you *okay*?" Jenny asked.

But Elizabeth was running now. A sulfurous bile shot into her esophagus and it was all she could do to push through the basement door, then the front door, onto the porch. Who was Easy E? She spewed a mess into the new snow.

The realizations mounted, pyramidal. Two weeks ago, Julian had wanted to get laid, and Elizabeth was the only available

person to lay. The possibility descended—maybe it had come from him? Maybe he'd gotten it from someone in Toledo, Pittsburgh, Ithaca—maybe he'd found another Elizabeth or Kayla in one of those towns and gotten it from one of them. Maybe he'd gotten an acronym and passed that along, too. She sucked back her phlegm and looked up at the sky, deep into the beer-commercial oblivion. Against the black the snowflakes became very huge very fast, just before they landed, like down, on her cheeks.

"Hey," Julian said behind her. There was a long pause. She couldn't face him. "You left your shoes."

She turned with her hand shielding her eyes. "I know," she said violently.

He tossed the boots onto the porch and then went back inside. Elizabeth stripped off her wet socks and put her feet into the fleecy interiors. A minute later he came out again in his parka with a wad of toilet paper. He offered it to her. "You wanna come in?" he asked.

"No," she said, wiping her nose. Julian put his hand on the back of her neck and mashed her there. Electricity shot through her body; a pulse, despite everything, in her swimsuit area.

"Come on," he said. His voice was soft. "I'll show you what I've done with the van."

She followed him down the block to where the van was parked, and when he opened the back doors she saw what he meant. The bottom was built up with plywood to make a floor, and he lifted the edge to show Elizabeth the grid of cubbies underneath, stuffed with cassette tapes, t-shirts, beef jerky. Julian was only passing through. She'd known this from the very beginning.

They climbed in and he turned on the ignition for heat. Arthur Russell came through the speakers—*I close my eyes and listen, to hear the corn come out*. In the glow of the streetlights they

unfurled a roll of egg-crate foam and sat cross-legged, their knees just barely touching.

"When are you leaving?" she asked.

"Couple days. I have some West Coast stuff lined up."

His nonchalance burned. "What about Kayla?" she tried to joke. It didn't come out funny.

"What about her?" Julian asked.

"Are you trying to date her?"

He pulled a plastic baggie and rolling papers from his pocket. "I'm not trying to *date* anyone," he said. He made Elizabeth's language sound absurd. "It's not about ... dating."

Her pride floundered, then left her. "Fine, *fucking*." And because the cause was already lost—"Is Rob right? Are you trying to fuck her?"

He sighed as if her questions were impossible, and tore at the nest of tobacco. "I don't think you get it. It's like, no one's everything. Some girls are pretty, some are cool, some just have style. Some girls are different. More like you."

Her mother had warned her once, never to trust a boy who tells you you're not like other girls. *He's trying to turn you against yourself.*

"How am I?" she asked.

He licked the cigarette and sealed it. "You're not, like, *shallow*. You're not always thinking about how everyone sees you."

Her heart flapped. It wasn't true. She felt a nebulous sense of guilt. "I have syphilis," she said.

The plainness of the confession isolated the sound of her voice, froggy; as when she heard herself echo back during bad cell phone reception. Way down in the pit of the moment, everything about her seemed ugly and silly.

Julian looked frozen in space and time, the unlit cigarette held out before him.

She rushed into the larger story then, anxious to soften and modify the news. The free clinic, the test, the antibiotics; the statistical facts of how really *common* it was. An Estonian person had given it to her. This last fact hovered doubtfully between statement and question, and she hurried, "Is there any way you could have gotten it—?" She couldn't ask more than that.

He set the unlit cigarette down, like an admission of defeat. "Did we use something?"

She shook her head.

He nodded and took his glasses off, staring at nothing. For a minute he looked vulnerable; a little like the bronze statue of Benjamin Franklin in the law quad. Then he lay back on his elbows and began to unbutton his jeans.

Sometimes people did things that were so unfathomable to Elizabeth, so different from what she herself would do, that her view of the human world expanded for a minute, and she felt overwhelmed by the unpredictability of everyone; of life itself. Its capacity to surprise and mortify and hurt her.

He opened his fly, then held up his phone to illuminate the slug of his penis. "Do you see anything?" He flopped it from one side to the other. "I thought I saw something this morning. There. Right there."

Elizabeth's heart raked. She was repulsed. As if to overcome it, she scooted closer. "Where?"

"There," he said. He tautened the skin between two fingers, then took her hand and placed it on him.

The Friends meetinghouse was a sprawling craftsman mansion full of upright pianos and second-hand sofas, their upholstery long permeated with the smell of lentils and black tea. On the main floor,

the newer addition of a large, windowed hall butted up against a forested nature preserve, junglous and sheltering in the summer, but barren and fragile-looking in winter. When Elizabeth was young her mom had explained that they weren't *Quaker-Quakers*; they were just people who went to Quaker Meeting. It was about being quiet and still; it was like mediation. *God—what's God?* her mom had asked. She was seven and she was told she could decide for herself. This was around the time Elizabeth first heard the theremin sound, like a spiritual placeholder.

Elizabeth rarely went to meeting anymore, but that morning she had the compulsion not to be too far from her mother. Now that they were here, though, she doubled back on her decision. People she'd known her whole life removed their shoes, kissed her on the cheek. No, the long quietude was not what she needed. The room full of blank faces, everyone turning inward, further inward, listening. The "sharing." Members of the congregation rose to say naked, emotional things. Elizabeth was afraid someone might say something to break her. She did not want to cry in front of everyone.

It was cold out, but not the kind of face-aching weather it had been yesterday. She followed the trail that looped through the woods, down to the river, over the arc of the wooden bridge, its circle reflected on the river. The sky was as flat and white as a freshly painted wall. She'd forgotten her iPod, and the silence felt claustrophobic and empty at the same time. The Arthur Russell song still lingered in her head; now she never wanted to hear it again. She closed her eyes and when she opened them, they were wet.

She had not found the thing he was trying to show her. Beneath her fingers he sprang to life, and then he put his hand on hers and guided it. If she broke the action down to its minutia, it was nothing more than a movement; like a handshake or a dance. If

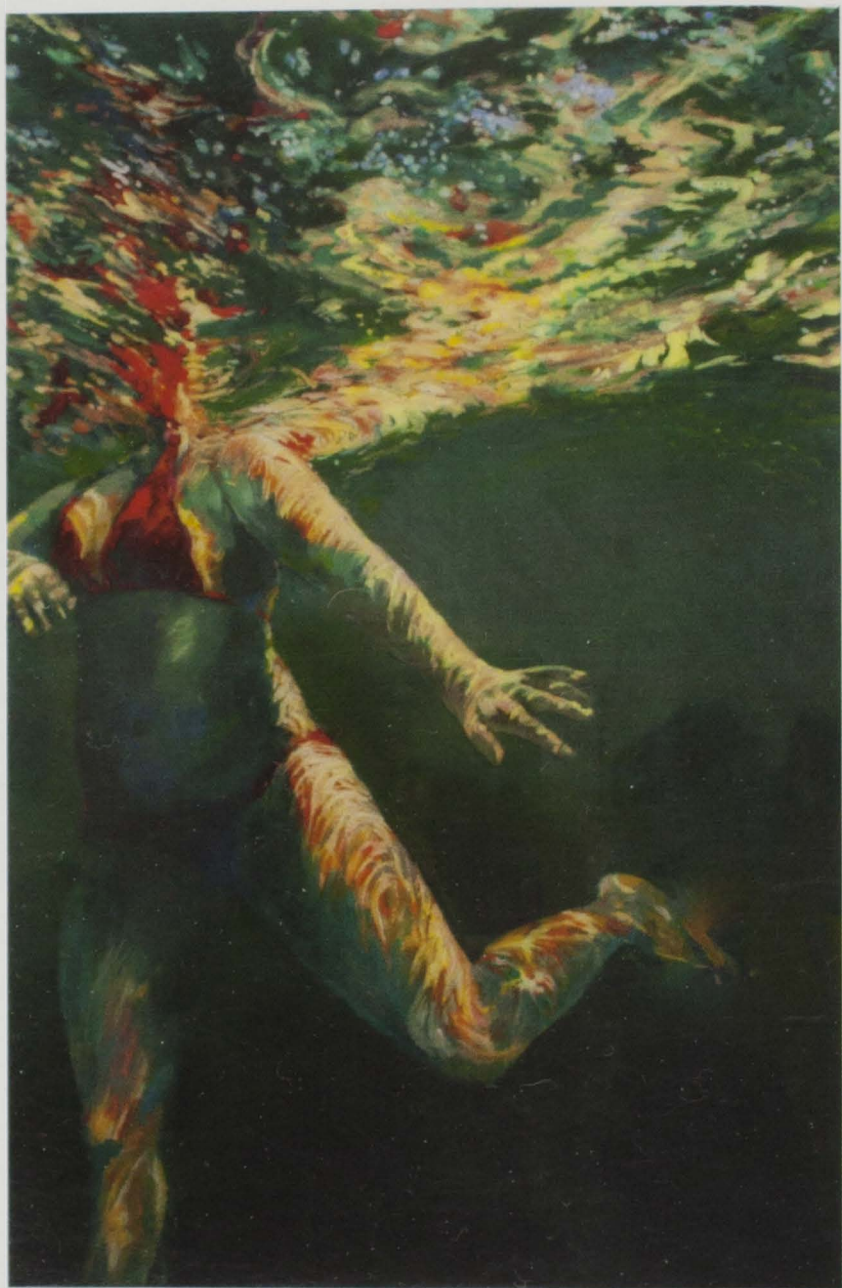
she thought of it this way, it was almost insignificant.

The trail led back to where it had started and she approached the meetinghouse again. From this distance, the glass hall looked like a diorama, everyone inside preserved. It was her mother who was standing now, a rarity; the last time Elizabeth could remember had been a year ago, just after her diagnosis. But now her mom's chin was high, her eyes closed, her mouth open. The song came wordless and sweet across the landscape. Experimentally, Elizabeth opened her own mouth and released a high, steady note. There was no one around to hear. What had her mother heard in the silence to make her rise? What bell had rung inside her, to make her want to stand, and throw her head back, and sing?

SCOUT CUOMO

SUBMERGED









MOTEL ACROSS LINCOLN WHILE I PUMP GAS

Their big white pickup
has an oil tank in its bed.
Like dolphins arcing

through surf in unison,
two men outside a room
raise cans to their lips.

A third in a lawn chair lights
one up. His cupped hands,
a tiny fire, a tiny cave.

JACOB NEWBERRY

CICADAS (AWAKE AT MIDNIGHT)

They are alive in ways
that I have never been,
a fierce coursing current

of ignition and divine retreat:
all repetition through the fragile
and the fractious pattern of their lives.

They are a sheer, unblemished stream
of living, only instinct and direction.
Each instant in their hurried hours

is every instant, is the crossing of years
without distinction. A passing
without passing. The long corridor

of evening stretches out to them
as eternity does to us: indistinguishable
and unquestioned, static yet vital.

And what is there for me?
I am capable, I fear,
only of consuming, only

of taking in what they
will spend the long night
of their fevered lives producing.

In this single evening
I will absorb the whole,
the everything, the full

and spectacular galaxy
of their accumulated
and innumerable desires:

all the many and the varied
dreams they call out through
the black river of night

that still is new to them,
every first and every final
song of gratitude that they—

in the bustling torrent
of the chorus of their
sounds—are not alone.

They will die having lived
in ways that I have never known,
always hearing songs

from the others of their tribe.
Think of it: to be born into
a world while all the beings

that surround you sing
that chorus they
have always sung,

as though there'd
never been another world.
Think of it: to die,

your own cracked instrument
calling out that song,
that very harmony

that grew up from the air
itself before you.
So what is there for me?

Only this: I will know that even
at the milky, dying stretches
of this night, there are still

more stars beside me in the grass
than in the sky when twilight comes.
I know each day's restarting

brings a different host of beings
to sing its hymn.
My memory of that song

in the day is the concentration
of its echo, just as the stars
in daylight continue their

futile and exquisite burning,
their light absorbed
and quietly diffused
among our unsuspecting,
undeserving hearts.

[excerpt from] A WANT EXISTS

my beloved stands before the scroll and recites its many words but only one word is audible the audible word is the sum total of all the words of the scroll and the audible word is complete and the sound of the audible word is crystalline vibration and the crystalline vibration hums inside all of us and the hum is the hum of the world and the audible word is a whole world of a word and the word is the name and the name is impossible to pronounce and the name rings like a bell and the name fills the corners with its name-breath and the name fills all the world's corners with its name-breath and the name-breath is exhalation and inhalation and the name is untangled and the name is the words in an untangled form and the form of the name is unbroken and the name is restored from its brokenness of many words and the name is the one word that is all the words and the name is the world and the world's words and the corners and the corners of the world and the name is the same name as the name of love and the name of love hums inside all of us and the name of love is exhalation and inhalation and the name of love is also impossible to pronounce

THE HISTORY OF THE PASSPORT

Driving to the U.S. with my parents, I was 13 or 14, asleep in the back seat. The customs officer opened my door and put her face in front of mine. "Wake up," she said. "You're not a kid anymore. Show some respect when you're crossing the border." I might have imagined *show some respect*.

"For respect" is what the photographer said at the passport studio when he draped a neon-pink scarf around my shoulders to conceal my bra straps. The studio was offering a free portrait session with purchase of a passport photo—or maybe this photographer was just bored. He posed me in uncomfortable leans for twenty minutes, pulling worn teddy bears and dusty books and fake bouquets out of an ornate trunk for me to hold. I giggled out of embarrassment. "What's so funny?" he kept asking. I had no answer: why did it feel different to be photographed for a passport than for no reason at all? Looking at the finished photos made me even more uncomfortable: my bra straps, with the teddy bear, gave the impression of a grown woman who hadn't realized she was no longer a child.

The State Department recommends applying for a new passport if your appearance differs significantly from your passport photo. *Weight loss or gain, numerous/large facial piercings or tattoos, facial surgery or trauma* and *gender transition* are listed as good reasons to reapply. *The normal aging process* is not a reason.

I don't think that my passport photo looks very much like me.

Recently, a distant acquaintance announced online that he'd gotten a face tattoo. *About to do something really stupid...* he'd posted several days earlier. Then, a picture appeared of his face with loud tribal stretching from nose to ears. "It's especially sad because he had such a *beautiful* face," said one friend. "It's, like, *disrespectful* of his own beauty." I tried to imagine the state of mind I would need to be in to get a face tattoo. Directionless anger that

could be expressed no other way? A desperate desire for individuality? What could I ever have to say that would be true enough to post on my face?

My father once told me that I would never be able to see exactly what I looked like to other people; mirrors would always show me the backwards image of myself. Throughout my childhood, this idea frustrated me: the impossibility of seeing my face in any non-approximate way. Now, I prefer it this way; I am only backwards-sure of anything about myself.

Is my passport book fiction or non-fiction?

It turned out that the face tattoo was fake, an experiment for *Vice*. "Not a single person gave me a good reason why I shouldn't have one," he wrote in an article about his week with a face tattoo.

Since 2007, American passports have embedded chips with duplicate copies of the information printed in the booklet. This allows border agents to use facial recognition technology to compare the person against their digital photo. International visa-holders have had to supply fingerprints for years each time they cross into the U.S., and retinal scans are becoming common. The passport book is no longer being read—it is the body that is read. Mary Douglas writes in *Purity and Danger*: "The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system." National borders are being mapped onto bodily ones.

I was born in Canada and inherited my ability to get a U.S. passport from my father. He grew up in Watonga, Oklahoma, where he had a two-digit phone number. He was supporting himself playing music by the time he was 18 years old, and during Vietnam, he joined the Air Force band to avoid the draft. "So that I wouldn't have to move to Canada—now look where I am!" he jokes. As a touring musician, he has been to every state and prob-

ably visited more countries than not. The music group he performs with is called Nexus. "Nexus has its own frequent traveler card now," my father Tweeted. "Just saved me 45 minutes at customs in Toronto airport." The Nexus program allows frequent, pre-cleared travelers to be fast-tracked through customs entering Canada and the U.S. He had been worried that he wouldn't qualify for the program, since it depended on a retinal scan. The previous summer, he was hit in the eye with a tennis ball and the steroids he'd taken made one pupil stay permanently dilated. In the end, it was not a problem; apparently, the eye-reading machines can parse dilation just fine.

For every holiday while I was at university, my father drove 9 hours to pick me up at university in the United States, and 9 hours home to Canada. "It would be cheaper for me just to fly," I said once, at yet another gas station. "I don't mind," he said, or maybe "It's my job." Sometimes, I cried silently in the car, thinking about the new American friends I already missed, or worrying that I would never care about anyone enough to drive 18 hours in two days just to bring them home.

At home, people surprised me by the questions they chose to ask about my experiences at college. "That was very brave of you, to move to another country all alone," they sometimes said. I don't know the right word to describe it—exciting? Inevitable? Not brave. "What made you decide to apply to American schools?" No American has ever asked me this question. If somebody is asking this question, they are the type of person who does not want to hear the only truthful answer, which is that they're better than the Canadian ones.

I interviewed applicants from Toronto who applied to my alma mater. At my own interview a decade ago, the man—an intimidating lawyer in a full suit—told me, "You'll go there, and then you're going to come back to Canada." It was the only thing I

remembered from the interview. "The idea is that you bring everything you've learned with you back home." I found out later that he had broken all the rules: he pulled me out of school, came to my house, allowed my parents to sit in—all things explicitly advised against in the alumni interviewers handbook. I rephrased his words as a question to the applicants I met: "How do you feel about moving to the United States? How do your friends and family feel about the idea of you moving there?" It took them all by surprise; ready with thoughtful, articulate responses to my questions about their academics, extracurriculars, interests, they had not prepared an answer to this one.

A month into my freshman year, a journalist for the school newspaper interviewed me for an article about Canadians on campus. I hadn't thought deeply about the transition—it was still happening—and provided a cryptic sound bite, probably the least inarticulate quote she was able to pull from our conversation: "Any kind of change of environment for anyone makes you realize how much the place you were before affected who you are, and makes you recognize certain things specific to that place."

When you apply for a passport renewal, you can check a box if you'd like to keep the expired copy as a memento. There are two types of people in America: those who check the box and those who don't.

My coworkers from China explain that the process of obtaining a passport there is not straightforward. People are denied for all types of reasons. Friends and family are interviewed as if it's secret security clearance. One woman was asked to repay over \$100,000 in scholarships she'd received for her Chinese education, because the passport meant that she was moving away to work and the country was losing its investment in her.

A passport is a keepsake from home, so that you don't forget about it when you travel.

While living in the U.S., I filled out the census, and noticed that my roommate checked the "Other" box for ethnicity, writing in "Iranian-American." I was tempted to write in "Canadian-American," but the temptation was not strong enough to actually do it. This lack of pull is probably what characterizes me most as a Canadian-American.

The United States is one of the few countries that allow the renunciation of citizenship even to people who hold no other passport. An in-person interview is required, where agents are told to advise such prospective renouncers that they may find it extremely difficult to travel in the future, among other challenges that come with statelessness. There has been a rise in recent years of people giving up their citizenship: primarily, however, among the wealthy who do not want to pay double the tax.

As a child, I had a babysitter from Australia who gave up her passport for a Canadian one, as Australia did not accept dual citizens. "My parents can never find out," she had said. I felt an incredible sense of despair, both for the loss of her passport and for the secrecy. She did not appear to share my feelings. "Never let your passport expire," my father has told me countless times.

An astronaut goes through customs:

Border Control: What was the purpose of your trip?

Astronaut: To pioneer the future of exploration, expand frontiers, things like that.

BC: Are you bringing back any food?

A: I wouldn't call it food.

BC: Did you make any purchases while abroad?

A: I picked up some moon rocks, but I didn't pay for them.

BC: Did you come into contact with livestock or other exotic plants or animals?

A: I don't think so, but that's the big question, isn't it?

BC: How long were you away?

A: Just two weeks, but I saw the sun set over 200 times.

At the border: first, a reading of the passport; second, a conversation about the story. My father's advice for border crossing: "Give them as little information as possible." He has given me iterations of this same advice many times over the years. I asked him whether I should call the IRS to ask a question about my taxes. "I don't know," he said, "but what I always tell new musicians in the symphony is: don't speak to the conductor unless he speaks to you first."

At three weeks old, my parents traveled with me to the U.S. I was too new for a passport and had no other paperwork; I barely had a personality. Customs refused to let me enter—my parents needed to prove I was their child. My mother held my face up beside my father's. "Whose baby do you think this is?" she argued with the officer. "They look identical—there's no question this is our baby." The officer instructed my mother to go to a notary public upstairs at the airport to obtain documentation. The notary public did not require any identification—he took my mother's word that I was her child.

The protagonist (co-author?) of the U.S. passport book can be one of two genders. He or she is described as an object: height, color, place of origin. What is not explicit in the passport book is that the protagonist is alive. A cadaver (in whole or part) cannot cross the border with a passport book; it needs a death certificate. Exceptions: teeth, hair, fingernails, toenails, bones, bone fragments, and cremated remains all may be carried across the border with someone else's passport as luggage. A casket, with flowers,

may enter the country duty-free if accompanied by a corpse.

I have become fascinated by the planned ghost town in New Mexico called The Center for Innovation, Testing and Evaluation—or, simply, The Center. It would have all the features of a regular town, except for one—the people. Corporations could rent time and space to run tests on research projects that they could not test on real-live-towns. The idea was apparently inspired by Walt Disney World, in that the exterior spaces would appear real, and all of the laboratories and maintenance would be hidden behind the scenes or underground. For a year, I make notes, struggling to develop a story around The Center. I recall a challenge from an old teacher: write a story with no people in it, and no personification allowed. He already knew what would happen: we'd end up writing about fire, or a storm; it would be pretty boring; no longer than a page. Eventually, I read that the plan for the Center has been cancelled. Perhaps it is as difficult to create a town without people as a story without them.

As a child, I sustained an obsession with Biosphere 2, an artificial, closed-in ecosystem in Arizona. Biosphere 1 is Planet Earth. This project did include humans, who lived in the system for years at a time. I had a picture book about its missions, but most of what I remember from it is the recurring dreams I had where I edged up to the sealed glass limits, breathing in humid green and peering out of the fogged glass. There was some sort of comfort in imagining myself so clearly and specifically contained.

Sealand is an abandoned fortress in the sea off the coast of England that has been named its own nation by the family of residents that claimed it in 1967. It has issued its own passports, currency and flag, but in 1997, all passports were revoked due to a pandemic of false Sealand passports turning up worldwide.

The Vatican issues passports; the Pope's passport number is

always 1.

Foreign Policy outlines four simple steps for starting your own country. Step one: "You must have a defined territory. You must have a permanent population. You must have a government. Your government must be capable of interacting with other states."

What state of mind would I need to be in to start my own country? Perhaps it would be similar to the one needed for a face tattoo; directionless anger; thirst for individuality; pent-up frustration with no vent.

The final step, according to the magazine, is to send a letter requesting recognition to the following address:

*Ban Ki-Moon
Secretary General
The United Nations
First Ave at 46th Street
New York, NY 10017
United States of America*

Shortly after I moved back to Canada after seven years in the U.S., my friend Sam visited. We browsed through a list of screenings at the Toronto International Film Festival. I wanted to see one called *How to Start Your Own Country*. Sam laughed and said no. "Why not?" I asked. "Terrible title," he said. "That's a title for an instructional manual. I don't want a manual. I want a story."

This is a story about the passport.

CONNIE MAE OLIVER

DEAR UNCLE LARRY (XV)

The neighbor's cat has been lost since 2009,
he's still orange, partisan.
But the consequences of our forebears
are missing from our patrician contemporaneity. I go to the museum &
again I stare, no choice but to fight with my eyes.

In three years, late birds and supplies, seven thousand
give more numbers, I'm exhausted, I roll on the floor
of the museum, I say that it looks like you're saying "Yes"
from upside down, thus acquiring "Yes" from all costs.

I've painted nothing. There it is, it's yellow, I gesture limply, there it is.
The images dragged from street to street corner, you know,
I stood in front of Maria Müller's building door, her name still on the ringer
and thought of Larry. So handsome. I'd wanted to call.

Larry was like the Soviet Union and its entire society,
he was like the women who made love to younger men in the
bedroom adjacent mine, *bison* I called them,
because they were enormous to me,

and who, through sheer intrigues, flung me and
BOOM! I swept the checkered kitchen floor. BOOM!
My student produced a gun,
Hast du angst? And I'd said "nein" I really had—I thought
they've been fine, these twenty seven years, if this is the end,
she'd taken me for a Rhineside picnic.

An airplane fell sleeplessly into pipettes, but we
shall undo their docks, we shall rewrite their picnics.
How it hurts now—hurt being the requisite for
discourse with one's own nonsense—
how it hurts now that I can't lay on that grass with her!

THIS IS WHAT IT WILL BE LIKE

Hast du angst? she had asked, turning the barrel with her manicured hand.

Today! Let's think,
beat little drums slung to your waists, the climate is profound
it is an award-winning climate, a nameless mass of climate.

Death came so easily, once. Now we're online, and thus
not allowed to die. The macro photos of niçoise, the updates
about our nasal passages—more so than them in particular—count on us.
How indeed could we ever?

Don't forget, we're made of lake, we're suddenly hacked
and painting self portraits in bath tubs. Larry said he'll write an email

to his entire family, warning them.
I thought privately, flowing away, his crazed eyes the color
of a frozen lake. I wouldn't have dared, instead
I went to the museum and practiced my speech,

tested the floor again, again it was white. Please stand up,
frau. It sounded like an insult—you little *frau*. Women in
Germany grow up to be men, grow up to be mad, in their
pirate ships they drink Aperol Spritz and go unrecognizably
home without captains.

They do this forever, which is what the present is.
For what do you lament the absence of film photos? Or
that music comes now from screens? What
is so wrong with that? The neighbor's cat is crying in earnest
the persimmon tree is bare. It used to be heavy with hot moons

now it's just branches overlooking a scene. A mammal who
suffers in scenes, and lives on! We count cats on the abacus

we watch the news, and he drowns himself now in a bathtub
in a painting! Like, softly.

Larry, in my dreams, seizes my arm and does something incredible.

THOMAS PATTERSON

THIS IS WHAT IT WILL BE LIKE

if you leave this house because it speaks to you night after night
asking for something back

and if there is nothing to give back
because she died

and if loneliness is a tree
dug into by an ax

or if a friend says you should give her
things away now and never look back

if you ever hope to start living again
or if the science known to your children

makes them believe they did not
expect to find anything left of her here at all

because
it is what it is

but you said, science is not art
although anyone looking from the darkness

might suspect that you've
filled the night up with an aesthetic of old ghosts

or if you invite someone else over to practice
an imperative ritual

and if there is a thrilling shallow between that woman's
shoulders tonight a tapered glassine vale

it will contain this message from you
"you have misjudged me because

by tomorrow I will have forgotten you" and when your lips
press down against those words in an hour of desperation

you will pretend
not to believe them.

HYPOTHERMIA

The *hog and jog*. The *bolt and jolt*. There's nothing like it. You can try all you want, but there is nothing that tightens the nerves in your abdomen like skipping out on the bill and watching the busboys and dishdogs fill your peripheral vision as you burst through the double glass doors.

This is our goodbye dinner for Alex. He orders a double cheeseburger because he's beefing up for basic training. He's about to leave for the first Gulf War. When Alex got word that Saddam was the new Hitler, he'd ridden his bike down to the recruiter adjacent to the Skyline Chili before you could say hydrogen cyanide. Jessica, Alex's girlfriend, orders a Caesar's salad because she's on a perpetual diet. Vanessa, my date, orders buffalo wings, two eggs, a waffle, fruit yogurt and a hamburger with fries, because she's bulimic. She gets the hamburger instead of a cheeseburger because she's Jewish, and she can't mix cow meat with cow milk. I note the yogurt on her order, and she says that she's not that Jewish. Just Jewish. I order pancakes and a double order of bacon because I enjoy eating breakfast food for dinner.

When Alex joined the service, we assumed it was hi-jinx, a lark, but then he had his physical, and then he signed his papers. If he fails to show up in the morning, he will be considered AWOL. I know part of Jessica's plan is that we'll get busted, and he won't have to go to the Army, and since I'm a little bit in love with Jessica, my plan is that he be there at eight o'clock on the button.

The waitress asks if we want anything to drink. Do they serve beer? They do not. Alex and I get a pot of coffee, Vanessa gets a Coke, and Jessica orders a Tab. Our waitress is a tall, ostrich-legged red-head. You can tell that Big Red experienced about a nano-second flash of beauty in her twenties, a flash that she squandered swilling plastic bottle vodka in a Clearwater Beach singles bar, now cursed to serve smart-assed teenagers at three a.m. for the next thirty

years. But the woman must have some kind of Jedi voodoo, because she knows we're going to skip out on the bill. It's my fault, I know. At this point, I stare at her eyeball to eyeball, trying to convey telepathic messages that all is cool, all is kosher. I try to convey the message that there are a whole slew of universes going on simultaneously. I've been on a serious multi-verse obsession, and I have been trying to tell her that there is one universe where we pay, one where we're the waiters, and one where we bolt. This happens to be the one where we bolt. Therefore, all is cool. All is dandy. All is kosher. We are going to eat, continue eating, find our seam, cruise through the double glass doors and disappear into the darkness. So no need to fret, I tell her with my eyes. I try to assure the waitress that in a very near dimension, we are doubling the tip.

However, all is not kosher. When we started the evening at Alex's for a couple cans of beer, we were hitting his fluorescent blue PVC ice bong, chugging down some kind of wicked, throat scalding skunk weed. We were also watching CNN and the little Kuwaiti princess bleat about the Iraqi soldiers and the incubator babies. The four of us watched in amazement as the girl described the atrocities of Saddam's army. Then, Jessica cut the cannabis haze like a laser-guided tomahawk missile when she said that the whole thing was a load of crap. She declared that the girl was a tasty little cunt, and you couldn't write a better load of dog shit in Hollywood. I said, "Well," but all of my instincts told me to agree with Jessica. I could tell her comments rubbed Alex the wrong way. She was his girlfriend, and he was less than twenty-four hours from joining the fight. After we poured the bongwater into four evenly divided cups and shot it down, Alex said, pointing to the television, "That's why I signed up. Some jerk-off dictator out there orders his men to burn everything, rape all the women, slaughter the babies, and then his men go out and follow his orders. You know what that tells me?" We waited for an answer, even though we knew the answer.

The news on TV had told us already, so we knew what was coming. "It tells me that they're not human. They're inhuman."

This is my second date with Vanessa, and nothing like a hog and jog to ward off the sophomore jinx. She and I work together at the Salad Station five miles up U.S. 19 – one of those all-you-can-eat places that hypnotize neo-hippie health freaks. I can tell that Jessica neither likes nor approves of Vanessa, which I chalk up to natural female seed-competition. Jessica did not approve of Vanessa from the beginning, though Vanessa barely passed my test as well. But her reputation suggested that my chances were good, and sitting on my shoulders spoke both an angel and public health official, each of them pleading their cases.

On the drive out to Denny's, the conversation about the bleating Kuwaiti girl took a lull, but after Big Red serves our meals, Jessica can't help herself and says, "Babies don't just shrivel up and die when you take them out of incubators. They would eventually die of starvation, or their blood sugar levels would drop, and they would go into shock. They don't just die if you take them out of incubators."

"They would die of hyperthermia," Alex said.

I correct Alex and tell him that if the babies died of hyperthermia, it would mean that once taken out of the incubators, they would overheat to the point of baking. Their blood would boil, and they would die.

"Hypothermia," Jessica says.

"Whatever," Alex says. "They would die. They would die of hypothermia."

"Eventually," Jessica says, "but the girl said that the Iraqi soldiers took them out and watched them die on the cold floor."

"The cold floor," Alex says.

"But babies don't just die that easily," Jessica says. "Babies are resilient."

"She was talking about preemies," Alex says. "Preemies."

"Babies have even survived abortions," Jessica says.

I give Jessica a quick look and give her the kill sign, slashing my hand across my throat, nodding my head towards Vanessa.

"I'm just saying that the babies would not die that fast. It takes a while for babies to die. And if these Iraqi soldiers are so savage, they would have just skewered the babies," Jessica says.

"She's right," I say.

"I am right," Jessica says, as Big Red comes along with our coffees and sodas. She asks us if we need anything else, and Alex orders a side order of fries and maybe a Reuben, Vanessa gets another waffle and fries, Jessica breaks down and gets a burger, and I get one, too. Then we ask for chocolate shakes all around. Big Red gives us another evil eye, and I reciprocate with my telepathy.

"If these Iraqi soldiers are in the process of invading a country," I say, "and they are as vicious as this Kuwaiti princess claims, would they really waste their time waiting for the slow process of babies succumbing to exposure, what with all of the raping and pillaging to do?" I tell the table that just as a bystander, if I was a savage Iraqi soldier, I'd make time with that Kuwaiti princess.

"She's fifteen," Alex says.

"You're disgusting," Jessica says. "I know what you're trying to say," she dips one of Alex's fries in ketchup, "but you're still kind of disgusting."

"You people are blind," Alex says. "It's sad. That's the problem. It's sad."

"It just smells too weird," Jessica says, continuing to eat Alex's fries. Then Vanessa takes one of his fries, too, dipping it in a monkey dish of mayo, bites only the part of the fry coated in sauce, then dips again and again.

As the second date, it is also the second occasion in over two years that I have not served as the third wheel. Usually, Alex, Jessica and I do everything together. We play miniature golf together. We pack back-packs full of Milwaukee's Best and ride our bikes to Dunedin Causeway and swim across shark infested inlets to Caledesi Island, or we go way out on Clearwater Beach or Honeymoon Island where there is nobody. We slug beers, then Alex and Jessica crawl off beyond the dunes and sawgrass to hump, while I smoke cigarettes and take a swim out to the dark waters and try to attract hammerheads.

I know why Alex and Jessica keep me around. As Alex's best friend, I'm also their court jester. My skills as permanently lonesome are crafted to keep those around me entertained. I've been able to buy beer since I was seventeen (also Jedi voodoo), juggle fire, funnel beer standing on my head, and lately, there is my obsession with parallel and multiple universes. I'm also the opposite of Alex. Alex's parents pay his rent, buy his car, give him money, a stereo system – everything. And he gets Jessica. I'm Johnny Two-Dollars, even with a job – all of my cash going to repair my '66 Falcon, or tuition for the fall semester at the junior college, or gas, or anything. It's even odd for me to be out with a woman. Where Alex and Jessica touch arms and hands and legs with ease, naturally eat from each others' plates, I can feel each negative ion pulsating between Vanessa and myself. Jessica told me I would be fine, just hang out – be cool – don't be weird. Each time I start to talk about the multi-verse, she holds up her hand and backs me down.

"Just nuke'em," Vanessa says. "Just drop a bomb on those assholes and be done with the whole fucking war in a day."

"We're not going to start a nuclear war," Alex says. "We may drop a neutron bomb if we absolutely have to, but those bombs are barely bigger than some of the major conventional weap-

ons – and we wouldn't drop them on residential areas, like Saddam does. Trust me on that one. We're going to dismantle the place piece by piece and shove their SCUDs up enough asses until they get the hell out of Kuwait. Kuwait's freedom is our freedom. That's what I'm fighting for."

"That little Kuwaiti princess is a muppet," Jessica says. "Anybody can see that."

"We're all muppets, if you think about it," I say, though I'm not sure exactly what I mean.

"You're a traitor, baby," Alex says to Jessica. "I love you, honey, but they should put you to death." Alex takes a bite of his sandwich that is clearly overestimated, and it is quickly apparent that he isn't finished talking, but he may or may not be able to work the food down his throat, and for a moment, the three of us watch in anticipation. When he accomplishes this peristaltic feat and washes it down with a slug of coffee, he hammers his chest with the side of his fist and says to Jessica, "So you're calling that little girl a liar. That little Kuwaiti girl."

I raise my cup of coffee and say, "Well. Here's to Alex giving his life, so we can all be muppets."

"And here's to fighting for our freedom, so you pussies can hog and jog," Alex says.

"And here's to making sweet love to Jessica for the next two years," which very nearly turns out to be true. In the fall, when college starts, Jessica and I move in together in a little shithole off Douglas, in Dunedin, where we share one queen bed between us, no couch, one set of dishes and a single radio for entertainment. For one semester, we live like a team and harmonize. It's her job to wash the dishes and my job to kill the cockroaches living behind the walls and inside the dishwasher. We both attend junior college. She waits tables, and I get a job dogging dishes at Jessie's Dockside, working with ex-cons and assholes and heavy metal tattoo fiends

— and those are the cooks and runners. I'm on the bottom rung sweating it out in the dishpit. Jessica and I both correspond with Alex. She writes him her letters, and I research his war for him, sending him documentation of Kuwait's lateral drilling into Iraq oil fields, a little thank you gift for protecting them against the wrath of Iran. I tell him that Kuwait is nice enough to hire Iraqi girls as prostitutes, so their sheiks can do their own drilling. I send him information about Great Britain's whimsical process of demarcation, transcripts of interviews from Vietnam Vets, prepping him for the star treatment when he returns home with his shellshock and mysterious illnesses. He writes me letters of camaraderie, the spirit of freedom on the front lines, how you can feel it in the air, how you know freedom is worth fighting for because you can taste it. He writes how he happily pulls hundred and seven-hour shifts in a tank, sweating out the hours with dirty jokes and amphetamines. He writes me about what it was like to be part of history, to be part of a book, part of something real that everyone will remember for centuries, and when the war starts, he writes about how they had cruised along the trenches in behemoth vehicles just pouring the sand back in the trenches, doing away with whole regiments of Saddam's forces. They bury the sweaty fuckers alive without wasting any of their precious depleted uranium-tipped bullets. He writes of the fate of the ragheads who had tried to flee, only to taste the fury of M-16s, spinning and ripping through their flesh. Alex writes that their artillery does not gun people down, but literally rips people in half, and when people are ripped in half, it is not clean, like a blade, or a halved rump roast, but bodies burst and bubble, and it doesn't even look like meat. Alex writes about the adrenaline, the rush, the victory and a smell so odd and intense that it works its way in like nothing the sand can do. The smell gets in your nasal cavity and stays there, and even when you're back at camp, beating off in a lukewarm shower of non-potable water,

you still can't get the smell out of your head.

"The good news," I tell the table – Jessica holds up her hand, but I can only hold out so long. I drain my chocolate shake and say, "According to multi-verse theory, there is an alternate universe where we don't even go to war, and Alex is free from proving his machismo. Of course, there is also a universe where Alex stays here and goes to junior college, and I get the hard-on for killing raggheads. Seriously," I say. "People thought Isaac Newton was a loon when he ran around talking about gravity. In time, in the future, the multi-verse will seem like common sense."

"Why do you talk about these things?" Jessica says. "I love you to pieces, and then you start talking about retarded things."

"This is legitimate quantum theory," I say.

"It's legitimate *dork* theory," Alex says.

Jessica says that you can't have a universe for every decision you make, that you can't just have a billion universes. She speaks with a milkshake mustache that makes her look both old and young at the same time. It also gives her a look that makes my stomach go cold. When Jessica was young, a robber had broken into her house and bashed her in the head with a fire extinguisher, shattering the top of her orbital bone. As a result, her left eye droops a little, a couple millimeters shy of grotesque, but instead gives her face that extra impressionistic flair that makes me crazy about her. I ask her why you can't have a billion universes.

"Because you can't."

"Why not?" Vanessa says. "If he believes it, it's true."

"That's not true either," I tell Vanessa. "Things don't become true just because you believe them."

"Yes, they do," she says.

"This is why," I tell them, drawing a diagram of a tiny dot, surrounded by two more dots, and explain to them that this is an

atom. The vast majority is space, and these particles of matter actually breathe, they expand and contract. You don't have to stack one universe on top of the other, but you can layer them. You can live side by side these other worlds, and they can even be closer than that. They can be intertwined.

"Again," Vanessa says, "just nuke'em."

Jessica tells Vanessa that we've changed subjects.

Vanessa says that when you die, you're worm food. "You people are driving me batshit. We need to get the hell out of here." She announces that she is going to the bathroom, and I'm surprised that it takes her this long. Every minute that passes, her body is absorbing molecule after molecule of nutrition, and it must be killing her. I want to tell Vanessa to wait, because I know what Jessica is going to say next, I can pull the words from her mouth like a sleeve full of scarves, and I do. Jessica says she is leaving. She gets up and walks out the door, and I know that I'm in one of those moments where you can reel time back and forth at will, where you can see the motivations and faultlines, actions and reactions. I can feel parts of me waking and slumbering and I know that I can't go back to the Salad Station after ditching Vanessa, even though she walks out two minutes after us to the parking lot, untouched and unwatched.

For Alex and me, the Dobermans are let loose. In the corner of my vision, I see Alex square up against a busboy – the asshole is completely ignorant of the fact that Alex is already fighting for his country – he gets arrested, and Uncle Sam is already one man down. The busboy has Alex by the collar of his shirt with his outstretched arm – not a bad move had he been gripping me, but Alex pulls him close by arching back then releases a flurry of fists, and that's all I need to see before cutting between the cars and bolting across the highway. I use a rare skill of being able to time speeding vehicles weaving in opposite directions, a skill

the busboys lack, and they know it. Once across the six lanes, I stand safely with a raised middle finger. That's when I see Vanessa through the windows across the street, safely erasing any additional guilt by walking out of the double glass doors.

All of this is easy to see at the moment, in the present, sitting there, still at the restaurant, picking over the remains of our feast, and I know that I'll forgo the night's sleep before shipping Alex off to the war, and that he will be writing me letters about the desert, and that he'll write to me that his regiment had returned to the site of the war's beginning the following day to make certain that everyone had either been buried or slaughtered, and he had not expected to see what he had seen. I could practically read the letters sitting there in Denny's, his description of arms and legs sticking out of the sand – the scene had looked like some kind of horrific student art exhibition out in the middle of the desert – some of his fellow soldiers even stealing boots, and personal items, bullets and weapons, and in some cases teeth, and in every case gold teeth, but I did not expect to read his confessions or the fact that he remembered our conversation about the multi-verse, and that he had proof that I was wrong. He writes that it isn't a matter of a separate world where the enemy could have been him, but it was like returning to a site where you have physically removed your soul, then you hold your soul by the back of its invisible hair, then drag a knife across its neck from ear to ear, then bury it headfirst in the hundred forty-five degree sand. He writes that it was the first time he had ever felt light and heavy at the same time. I can read his letters from the Highway of Death here, too, sitting in Denny's, pushing our luck with a coconut crème pie, how he had not been there the day the jet planes strafed the strip of land from Kuwait to Baghdad, when the hundred thousand terrified Iraqi soldiers raced across the desert until they were reduced to teeth and carbon, but he shows up the next morning, with the task of walking through

the mess of twisted metal and tanks, dismembered bodies, frozen in horror, shooting anything that moved.

"Everybody knows it," he writes. "Everybody here knows it, but most people won't talk about it," and I know what he's talking about. He is referring to something I wrote to him in the beginning, that when you kill, you kill. You end the energy of a single life force, and whether you like it or know it, whether it is murder or not, justifiable or not, your own life force is affected, and your cells even know it, and your cells will remember that you have snuffed this force, and the killing will resonate for the rest of your life. Even Shakespeare knew it, which is why he did not allow his murderous characters to sleep.

One night after work, Jessica and I split a six-pack of Milwaukee's Best and a pack of Seven Eleven ephedrine. We rode our bikes across Dunedin Causeway down to Honeymoon Island. By the time we reached the beach, the ephedrine had turned our hair follicles into ecstatic electrodes, lighting up like static glow when the wind blew, and the water even seemed to be in on the fun, as phosphorescence splashed along with us as we swam out to Caledesi across the shark waters in mysterious dayglo green. It was one of those warm Florida winter evenings, when the water runs cold and nothing is feeding on the food chain. The sharks are down there, but they are letting us have our time. We held on to each other at times, our legs kicking, our knees and ankles knocking together, sometimes locking together in simulated bliss. We returned home, back to the rat trap on Douglas, both of us itching something fierce from sand and saltwater residue. We soothed our stings with the burn of Seabreeze, and that's when they made the announcement on the radio about the beginning of Desert Storm. That night we slept under a single sheet on the same bed, and in the morning, she was on the telephone.

By May, the correspondence between Alex and I had ended. Once, later in the summer, I saw Alex's mother at Publix. We were both buying Cheerios. And then one afternoon near the end of summer, I saw Alex hitching up U.S. 19. He was all the way up in Tarpon Springs, near Klosterman on the opposite side of the highway. As I passed, I could see that his teeth had gotten longer as he shielded the sun from his eyes with his hands and looked for possible rides. He was wearing a plain white T-shirt and blue jeans. I could tell it was him in a second, and my heart juggled around in my chest for a couple hard strong palpitations, and I jerked a U-turn halfway to Alderman. It was a hot, Florida August. My car would provide no relief, as my '66 Falcon with the windows down was nothing but a moving convection oven with the A.C. a solid decade in decay. I wondered what Alex was doing this far north of Dunedin. Jessica had moved back with her parents, and Alex's parents were in Clearwater, but I imagined that there were probably a hundred reasons why he could be there or anywhere. I tried to catch up to him, but I was on the inside lane, and a Cadillac full of geriatrics blocked my attempts to change lanes and reach him. I tried to pass them, but they edged closer up on me. Then for some reason, I slowed down and got even with them. When they looked at me, I made a gun sign with my hand and pretended the shoot them all, one by one. The action seemed absurd, and foolish, and perhaps dangerous, but it had also taken me out of the moment. By the time I gotten into the far right lane, I had passed Klosterman Road again, and looking back in the rear-view mirror, I could see Alex still there on the side of the road, shielding the sun from his eyes, scouting down a lift.

CAROLINE KNAPP

HUSBANDRY MANUAL

clad is door enough and take this

in a wave and it breaks

catching up *see* to that at hand and

I have my darted fit

this like a conduit

this like a labor

criede at thusse place

this is the wood they live in

hollow

a teeth and hipbone hinge

arrives the fresh skins

I have my facture

my fracture dissolves into *is*

this Bearer goes away so presently

+

this present like a facet

patiently

this with no perspectival or pictorial

arrives in like a wave and

weather-like

skins

my brushes

+

are we not

clothed in

form

+

the weaver stands the loom
and bravely my
shaking still
still to shake in this to rend
web

+

this little wife
this morning
I have my composition
this afternoon
this evening

+

those roses are in a pile

that wind ope'd doors in the wood

I have flesh of my sap

a flash my seep

by perseverant workings the interior

like anything

else

little season

this is my house and this my

+

dead some residue

this kins

this the

+

I have this moment heard

+

this is my poore

gate

A. ANUPAMA

EURYDICE WRITES

A poetry of having no place to put my head when it is sad.
My eyes followed the back of yours as you played the music.
O, don't turn back to look at me, don't. What slowed you? O, why?

No sound from my following feet? The heaviness of my stare? Sudden fear that I was
saddened by your song, instead of gladdened? A wish to see me in absolute dark just
before I might step in light?

I remember you in light,
 against the light your ears,
 rounded caverns eternally lost to me now
your head, with no place to rest when it is sad, turned toward me
with a syllable of question on its lips, instead of song.

FORT COCHI, INDIA

Vasco de Gama landed here during the spice trade
and it feels European with its whitewashed buildings and exposed beams
but a man is cooking nan bread in a roadside tandoori
and Emily and I have traveled over the mountains
in a bus with no doors or windows.
Two white owls watch us from the darkness
as we walk past the tree-lined park and church
into town for dinner. I snap a picture.
We eat outside and listen to German tourists
bark orders to one another
and I assume they are discussing
their team's chances in the World Cup
though maybe they are talking about
all-night parties in Goa.
I order fish curry and a beer
and we talk about how much we don't want
to ride in the bus back over the mountains.
We can hear the ocean whining in the candlelight
of certain inchoate things we're only vaguely aware of.
We have only just been married.
The next morning we awake to shouting
and open our window to children
playing soccer in the park. We walk
around the island and discover an old synagogue
next to a junk shop with a decent collection
of vintage door knobs. I buy a book
about the Jews of Cochi and we keep walking,
along the edge of town, and then through it, into
a residential neighborhood where a cow
is being butchered on the street.
I try to take a picture but I am waved off
by a very unhappy looking man.

We stop to take a picture of a woman
whose daughter had her face painted like a clown
and then we stop for dinner
at a yacht club full of westerners
and we feel uncomfortable in our sandals
because everyone else has on shoes.
Much later, back in Boston,
I scan our developed pictures for the owls
but when I get to the one in Cochi with the trees at night
there is only the night and the trees and that is all.

SUDDENLY YELLOW

Smiley was this grimy kid I knew. He was famous in the neighborhood for having only one testicle, and he lived in a dark, neglected house on the lake. The never-mowed grass grew so high it went past embarrassing. I remember walking past his house only to find myself standing there, lost, staring at how beautifully the grass moved until I saw a pale face glaring in the window and I darted away.

Smiley killed things in horrible ways. We all claimed we hated him, but—shame on me—I admit I was fascinated with him. He was interesting. He had been abandoned by his father. He lived with his mother, a bawdy emergency-room nurse. She had shocks of white hair which sprang out amongst the dark and her eyes were mean. You did not want those eyes trained on you. You did not go over there. Sometimes you could hear her voice echo out of that dark house in ways that made the rest of the neighborhood seem bland and safe, though it was neither.

Also in the house there was a mute Russian grandmother and Smiley's teenage sister, Heather. There was a lot to say about Heather, too. Heather was a subject in herself. She was an open-mouthed, boy-hipped slut. So we had heard. She talked about *The Exorcist* a little too much and passed out cigarettes to the kids.

Smiley had adult-looking teeth as a boy, which might have been part of his charm (although Heather did too), and he walked down the middle of the street like a cowboy, which might have been more. He made a slurping sound out one corner of his mouth after he said something funny and for me it worked.

The rest of us walked around like there were cameras pointed at us—cameras, adults or maybe God, something that was aware of what we were doing at all times. I remember being embarrassed to use the bathroom, felt foolish sitting there with toilet paper in my hand. But Smiley was totally alone, and it set him apart from the rest of us. We were the neighbor kids and it was an identity we

hadn't even known we shared. We shared it until it was over.

My best friend Ashley was red-faced, needy and prone to embarrassing displays of emotion. We were only friends because she lived two houses down and because it was expected of us. Our mothers told us to make nice. Ashley and I got chicken pox at the same time and our mothers decided we could come out of quarantine to play with one another. I remember being relieved of my boredom but the moment we were alone she spread her legs and pulled her underwear aside, laughing uproariously. I realized then I hated her. Her mother made us macaroni and cheese from a box and little Jell-O desserts in the shape of gingerbread men. I didn't understand why someone would do that. Ashley mangled hers and sucked it up through a straw.

She told me Smiley shaved his grandmother's eyebrows off as she napped in the sun and I figured: I might as well believe that.

Smiley wore white socks on his hands when it was cold, trick-or-treated without a costume, and as I have mentioned, had the legendary single testicle. I don't know how everyone knew that but if asked he would admit it with a savage arrogance: *So what? What have you got, asshole? A stupid fucking mother, that's what.*

His secrets were public and it was different than so many of the rest of us, who worked carefully to keep our stuff hidden. We were given social luxuries he wasn't.

And certainly some of us needed our privacy. Joanne developed breasts early but it was much worse than that. Really what it was was that her nipples puffed out red and shiny and deformed-looking. If the boys had known about it, she would have been ruined. Geoff's mother was an alcoholic. She was from a genteel family in Arkansas; hiding it was what she *did*. Indeed, the whole family rallied together to keep it private. Winnie McIntosh destroyed her six-year old son's desire to wear eye-shadow

and lipstick—and he really, really wanted to—by humiliating him before he ever had the chance to be seen on the streets like that. Tiny Marjorie Lionel, mother of nasty-mouthed twin boys, Pete and Tom, had her dogs stuffed after they died, and arranged them to stare out the front windows of her small well-maintained house. The Swedish Widow Gerdy Ingegard ate dirt from her garden.

Looking back I don't know what we were all afraid of, and it feels nearly impossible to say that that's how we were: We all pretended we didn't know each other's secrets. As a phenomenon, it fascinates me. The thing, too, is no one had anything to be ashamed of. Eric's mother didn't shave her legs or her armpits, Charlene wanted to divorce her husband and move back to Aspen, but so what? Leann's mother was an anorexic and her father was a minister, who looked the other way even as she came out of the bathroom with tidy cuts up and down her arms, saying she will never, ever eat again, and Leann chimed in, me too, daddy, me too.

I slept in a clean room with clean sheets surrounded by toys I believed loved me. I was a nervous girl and while it was something I knew about myself, I did not know what to do with it. I was a finger-chewer, imaginative to a fault.

We lived on the front range of Colorado. The town was small and flat, dull and perhaps somewhat unoriginal but we were silhouetted by the Rocky Mountains which were supposedly incredible but I think they were more or less invisible to me.

I was ten years old for what seemed like a very, very long time. I remember one white foggy morning we all waited for the school bus. The air was cool and still. It must've been early fall. The air was so swollen with moisture that the birdcalls stayed trapped up in the trees. I remember standing there and waiting for the sound to come down but it didn't. Ashley, her boring brother Saul, devout little Teena and her sister, Rose, King Georgie, Joe, my near-twin brother, Smiley and me were standing at the side

of the road, a huge alfalfa field behind us. It was our designated bus stop. Our bus driver was Wilber. He had a heavy beard and a leather vest, his T-shirt tight over his jiggling belly. We ran into the wet alfalfa fields as we waited for him. On that white morning, we all ran out and I found myself lost. I lost my sense of time. I was dreaming. I spun in circles and listened to myself breathe, the white everywhere. I grinned and danced, enchanted by the great bright whiteness.

I'd never been enchanted quite like this. As soon as I heard the brakes of the bus and saw the flashing yellow lights peek through, I knew it was too late. I felt a kick of panic. I walked through the fog and found Smiley, sitting on a tuft of alfalfa. He was clapping.

"The bus left us," he said.

"How is that possible?" I said.

He laughed. "Let's walk," he said. He let out a measured smile and tossed a stone back and forth.

"Walk!" I said. "But school is miles from here!"

"Yeah," he said. "That's why we ride the bus. But so what? What else do you have to do today?"

Off he went, and off I followed, deeper into the field, into the glistening pure fog. We walked side by side, he tossing his stone, chatting. I didn't say anything. I couldn't shake my amazement of the moment. I felt dangerous, unsure of myself. Smiley seemed to enjoy himself. His face was relaxed; he was laughing. Life was good for him.

I tried to remind myself what I'd seen him do to fish last summer: nailed them alive to hot boards, pulled off their fins, left them to die because he'd gotten bored of torturing them. He shaved off his grandmother's eyebrows. His sister was a slut.

When the field ended we rounded Bard Lake and went through a neighborhood of new houses. They were nearly all the

same house, the same three colors and the yards were planted with little trees which looked like sadness to me. A younger-than-school age kid was in his driveway with chalk, making crude drawings of people pooping.

"Poop," the kid said and me and Smiley laughed but the kid, serious, did not join in. "Poop," he said, solemn, and his mother called him in.

I saw a woman a couple houses down exercising at her front window, jumping and pumping her arms.

We crossed at an intersection I'd been in hundreds of times but never on foot. I was in a new world. I wasn't used to cars passing by me; I was used to being safe inside them.

We went through the graveyard—some dead kid must've had a birthday anniversary because there were balloons at a newer-looking grave and Smiley reached for one and popped it without slowing down. "A whole bunch of *dead* people," he said, as though he were making fun of them.

A car dealership made way to the back playground of our elementary school. There it was. I saw the seven huge cottonwood trees I avoided in the summer because oftentimes in the heat the branches were crawling with fleshy caterpillars that smelled bad. By now the fog was long gone. I don't know what time it was. We went around the school the long way. Kids in classrooms saw us and pointed, open-mouthed.

Smiley opened the front door for me. He swaggered into the office and spoke to the secretary, his palms flat on her desk. He looked her squarely in her face. The secretary, Miss Louisa, had dimples and seemed helpless—We had *walked* to school, she wanted to know? We missed the bus and just decided to *walk* here? I didn't say anything except to agree with Smiley's story.

"That's what happened," I said. "Wilber didn't wait."

We were told to get to our classrooms. I wanted to know if

my mother would be called but I couldn't ask in front of someone who didn't care one way or the other.

Outside the cafeteria he turned on his heel and smiled.

"See you," he said. "That was fun."

It hadn't occurred to me that fun was a part of this, but as a matter of fact, it was, and—a bonus—we were heroes for a day.

That next summer I'd heard he caught a robin and tied its legs to a long string. He let it fly away like a kite. As the string tightened, he ripped its legs off. The bird flew away legless, splattering a trail of blood through our happy neighborhood. Rumor has it that Winnie Macintosh was mowing her lawn in her silver string bikini, and was splashed with hot blood all over her artificial breasts.

I don't know if it actually happened or not. The neighborhood boys swore it was true. No one was brave enough to confront Winnie Macintosh.

Childhood galloped on, goofily, hungrily. I was ashamed of myself a lot of the time for things I probably didn't do. I hadn't yet come out of my shell, but I was starting to get the sense that there would be an end to it. There was no longer comfort in things the way I hoped there would be. Fourth grade turned into fifth and then sixth. Smiley entered junior high a year before I did. He had his own circles. He was on a different bus. I saw him getting mail once and there I was, as usual, walking my mother's dog. He looked at me but gave me nothing. Hurt, I looked down at the dog and saw it had bright bows in its ears and thought: That's why he didn't wave at me. Thanks, Mom.

All the neighbor kids, including myself, were proud not to need each other anymore. I finally got away from Ashley. There were no forced play-dates with devout little Teena or her trembling baby sister. No more neighborhood picnics. No more water-skiing at the lake where my mother lost her engagement ring. We had

entered into a time that we don't know how we got out of—seventh grade, eighth. I remember in high school Smiley wore a fake leather jacket and had long feathery hair. He was somewhat popular. He was handsome and he still slurped when he said something funny. His sister Heather was caught stealing something of value somewhere, and then she got pregnant and disappeared, or she got married and the Russian grandmother went to a nursing home, or she died. Nobody really knows.

At some point Smiley moved out of the neighborhood, but I don't know exactly when. I remember driving by his house with my father once and it was suddenly yellow. The grass was mowed and there was a man standing there, looking out at us, waving.

FAITH

1

The sky changes every evening into clouds,
and mountains lean into them.
The jungle opens a heart.

Moon rises listening to blood pumping in our small bodies.

Our neighbor, the one with a goat, turns on a radio.
And out of the jungle a fox tells us in a strange voice over the
strange voices singing,
his own story. So much so,
we all get up in the night frightened,
and stare off into the dark and say, *Did you hear that, ma'am?*

Listen. It is animal
and moon.

There is the song of prayer flailing
like pages of night.

2

A Buddhist monk names a girl after a Hindu goddess.
Another after a lightning bolt and a lucky moon,
and another *Christina*—
She paints pictures
like it's everything
she believes in.

Lotus.
Rabbit.
Rose.

She wants to be a disc jockey.
Deity hangs on a string around her neck—
for protection. Small hands, with small warts,
hold mine as she tells me the story

about Rama—who spent fourteen years in exile for his father's love.

3

The silhouette of mountain
marks a border between heaven and earth, song
and flesh.

A strange moth, green and blue, crawls
confused across concrete.

I kneel down, maybe for the first time in my life.

There is so much listening and speaking
in a world not belonging to anyone reading this.
Least of all, me.

Child, hold God in those hands.

TIRZAH GOLDENBERG

for seal, swift air
of the easternmost
outlying root

& the one
sleeping spore
of the weed

's dark circumference

the in-whorling
fin
of the helix

SOME AIR ASKS FOR NOMENCLATURE

*the seeds are closely related to the eyes ...
although they differ from the eyes in being enclosed*

— Goethe, *The Metamorphosis of Plants*

enclosed
a minute sun

for ballast
a larger leaf

one good shake
upon this axis

where an eye
is also blooming

in the moon
's prismatic

roundness
burst the seal

so prophet
sun

for Gustaf Sobin
at work in the old cocoonery

all these odes abandoned
were cloven in pod a summons
in the midst
of hereafter's bivalve

SOME AIR ASKS FOR NOMENCLATURE

The window curtain potbellies with wind
 and I see ghosts
 go looking for a marketing department,
 but we are done with the dead in this house
 today—hymns
 gave them enough refrain, and the lilies
 wilting as the fall wilts lit surfaces
 where optic pleasure
 burns long, before out. Not that we
 haven't been haunted, or sought it
 like a gem of paradox
 to keep production going when going
 produced the feeling too much had gone;
 we anointed porcupines
 to bear queries back from the spindly
 underworld, or overworld, or full stop. black.
 Cat-toppled sculpture
 submitted itself as evidence that death
 wasn't done with us yet, which it's not,
 but I admit I always
 had a student mistrust of the substitute
 and knew to dupe the guest from guessing
 my given name,
 and now I've given this house a house
 where air embalms a mum and sleep precedes
 mere bread and peaches.
 In comes quince on the wind, more dividends.

THE LOW GROUND AND THE HIGH GROUND

RECLAMATION I

The two-acre property my partner, Laurie, and I own divides cleanly in two: the high ground where we live now, atop an ancient moraine, and the low ground, where we lived years ago. In many ways, the halves are the same. Same trees. Same gravel road perimeter. Same mossy rocks. But while the high ground, these days, appears well-groomed – native shrubs line the driveway, high-limbed firs filter sunlight, a fourteen hundred square foot cabin stretches the definition – the low ground has gone feral: crisscrossed with downed cottonwoods, littered with flood-strewn lumber, silty and splintered, discarded skis, rock rubble, and, for a time, an unclaimed motorcycle helmet perched on a stump. No dwellings. Not anymore. One lone structure, a ramshackle garage half-sided and rat-infested, remains at the far end of the plat. We still use it for storage, so to retrieve our winter boots or a blow-up boat or a coffee can of lag screws, we must head down. But I don't like to. Not one bit. I avoid the chore at all costs, procrastinating, excuse-making, dreading the sight of ground, supposedly our own, flushed, scoured, trashed, abandoned. Maybe even haunted.

Truth is, the low ground was never much to brag about. When Laurie's mother first saw the place, she wept. For good reason. A rusted off-kilter swing set lay in the yard alongside hardened bags of mortar, stockpiles of broken brick, and several untended outbuildings. Brush filled in the gaps: thimbleberries and Oregon grape and fireweed, all of it brown with road dust. The former owners, a family of seven, had lived in a small unfinished house sided with T1-11, and they'd made a hard go of it: a woodshed, a garden, a smokehouse, and a hog pen. They fled when a November flood brought the river charging to the doorstep, seeping through floorboards. They were rescued in the bucket of a front-end loader, and soon put the place on the market. And we, knowing all this, spent our life savings to buy it.

We had reason to weep, but we never did. We worked instead, the way only earnest new landowners can. We were used to labor and enamored, despite our left-leaning politics and our meager means, of the American Dream. We planned, eventually, to move to high ground, but in the meantime we tore out moldy carpet and started anew: plumbing, insulating, stacking wood. We even planted a garden or, I should say, replanted the one that had washed to rubble in that November flood, then gone to weeds in one fallow summer. Reclaimed it, you might say.

We dug in cedar posts and spent \$300—a small fortune at the time—on concrete mesh, strung it eight feet high to keep the deer and bear out, and we added compost and minerals to the rocky soil. One day when I was preparing holes in which to plant potatoes the neighbor's cat, Daisy, nudged up beside me, reared up on her back feet, and began to dig full bore. With no idea what the purpose was, she threw herself at the task. I'm telling you: she was one of us, this cat.

That seems, now, like a very long time ago. A flood ripped through the low ground not once but three times leaving firewood scattered, cedar posts askew. Soil washed downvalley to fertilize brambles that finger now through misshapen rolls of mesh. We left the house empty, and we skedaddled. Daisy moved with us, trailing us to high ground with the neighbors' blessing, claiming us and gifted to us both. Each fall I buck former fence posts into short pieces to split for kindling.

If our low ground is haunted, it's by our youthful exuberant selves. But what did we lose? Not our lives, not our property. A neighbor couple had to sell off their flooded land, their summer home for over fifty years, to the government since there'd be no way to avoid future floods and likely no willing private buyers. We lost nothing, really, other than three hundred bucks, a garden spot and a few thousand hours of labor. Still I wonder: Was it worth

it? What was it all for? I can't face the low ground. Even though it's what we planned to see happen, even though I love that David Byrne song about parking lots turning to daisies with a passion, I can't face it. Sometimes I need to get the hell out.

RECLAMATION II

So we do. Though it's not as easy as it may sound. To leave the small landlocked mountain valley where we've settled in the North Cascades, closer to Canada than to Seattle, we must take a four-hour passenger-only ferry ride along a long narrow lake, a natural lake, glacier-carved and fjord-like, to a large Forest Service-owned parking lot where an aging Buick we inherited from Laurie's parents stays parked most of the time, then we must drive, usually, a very long way.

One gray December, we drove a thousand miles south to Whiskeytown National Recreation Area west of Redding, California where Laurie had been hired to work on old apple trees planted by early settlers and barely hanging on. Over the years, the trees had been stunted by lack of sunlight, shaded by oaks and sequoias, strangled by blackberries. Nothing was going well for these trees until Laurie showed up. Never mind that at home she does exactly the same kind of work or that, except for this job, she'd be laid off for the season and we'd be skiing, her favorite pastime. She didn't need the money. She wanted to work on the trees because they needed it, but also because she wanted to honor the fact someone worked like hell to plant them. You might think this had to do with what happened on our low ground, but it had more to do with her nature, and maybe human nature: she wanted to reclaim those trees.

Before she began, Laurie asked permission to burn as she went along. This is how she disposes of pruned limbs back home, and the warmth, in December, would be welcome. No way, the

managers said. There's a midden. Rats? Laurie asked. No, no. An archeological midden, a mound of obsidian chips several feet deep, the shavings from Indian tool makers, the Wintu, who lived in this spot along Clear Creek and in the surrounding Trinity Mountains, for twelve hundred years. Fire would melt the chips and destroy evidence of how they lived and worked. Rare evidence. OK, then.

To be clear, Whiskeytown is not mainly about apple trees. Like most federally designated recreation areas, it's a reservoir, this one created in the early 1960s by an earthen dam. President Kennedy famously attended the dedication. Each morning after dropping Laurie off to prune, I stopped beside the human-made lake and gazed at the hills, lush and green even in December, and every single time I did, I saw other people standing on the shore looking out: young and old, well-dressed and shabby, a mother and daughter, a man in a business suit, all of them on the way from somewhere to somewhere else. They stood stone-still and stared, taking solace from the uncluttered view, the human-free landscape, all that water. The reclaimed lake was lovely, sure, but I was still troubled. The problem with reclaiming, I found myself thinking, is that it so often leads to displacing.

So, while Laurie pruned, I set off in search of an explanation for who was here before the dam. Not so much *what*. I could pretty much guess the fate of the fish and the forest, and while I did want to know about that, my sympathy at the moment lay mostly with the settlers in the drowned town and the native people before them. So I headed out.

The nearby state park museum told a familiar saga: boom and bust. Gold rush desperados and Mexican ranchers and railroad Chinamen. As for Whiskeytown, the name derived from legend: once a mule tumbled off-trail, losing its load, and whiskey flowed into Clear Creek. The town was an outpost far off the beaten track dominated by men and miners and general lawlessness. It'd be a fair

guess that the town's name did not come solely from one incident.

I wandered through the building, and the mishmash layers of history, and settled in the foyer at a small display dedicated to the Wintu. I lingered over a few blurry photos of bark-slab homes until I noticed an old-time phone receiver hanging from the polished wood railing. I picked it up. An elderly Wintu woman began to tell a long lively tale of how she survived a lightning strike as a child and because of that was told she'd live long. And she did, she lived long. That was it. Her obvious glee, charming as it was, depressed me. I held the earpiece in my hand and wondered: Is this all there is? The fact that she survived? Survived to see her land drowned, her people dispersed, diseased, murdered and enslaved. Outside rain fell in steady streams. Cars rushed along the highway.

Her recorded voice chortled in triumph.

DEFINITION

Reclaim:

1. to recall from wrong or improper conduct
2. to rescue from an undesirable state; *also*: to restore to a previous natural state <*reclaim* mining sites> *b*: to make available for human use by changing natural conditions <*reclaim* swamp-land>

As long as I can remember, I thought the word had only to do with dams. The Bureau of Reclamation. The word held the scourge of outmoded arrogance: the concrete and the oversized turbines, men with dress shirts stretched tight over their bellies, slide rules in their pockets and god on their side. "To make available for human use." But also outmoded outrage. Marc Reisner's *Cadillac Desert* predicted catastrophes of siltation that never quite materialized, not yet at least; John McPhee's *Encounters with the Archdruid* profiled environmental super-hero David Brower and his fight to protect the Grand Canyon. "To rescue from an undesirable state."

When I taught *Archdruid* to college students, mostly from Phoenix, in the early 1990s, they approached Brower with head-scratching befuddlement. After three full weeks, one young woman raised her hand to ask: How do they decide which side of the dam the lake goes on? I realized I'd omitted some crucial content and, perhaps, how little any of us understand the concept.

What is wrong or improper conduct? Especially when it comes to the natural world: What is an undesirable state? Where is the moral high ground? (Or for that matter the low ground?) And who decides? Judgments cycle. Fire is bad, fire is good. Predators are bad, predators are good. And with the judgments, so go our actions: Put out fires, start prescribed fires. Eliminate predators, reintroduce predators. Like Sisyphus on a hamster wheel.

Reclaiming seems an unstoppable instinct. We are workers, most of us. Sure there's greed and hubris, but much of the time there's earnestness. If we're going to work anyway, why not work at making things right? I can't help it. I want to reclaim reclamation. I want to find a clean-edged creed to live by. But where?

ALTERNATIVES

Back home in the small mountain valley, a river management plan had been in the works for months, a plan guaranteed to be unpopular. We'd attended a public meeting shortly before we left town. The gist was this: the river needs more wiggle room, more freedom to wander, to crest its banks on occasion and seep outward democratically. No longer should dikes or dredging direct the course. At the meeting, local bureaucrats arrived prepared to describe a new series of small-scale structures and road relocations. But they got no chance. The room was super-packed with attendees who were spitting mad.

How did they not know of these plans? they cried. Plans they believed to be a subterfuge, a ruse to allow the federal gov-

ernment to acquire private property from folks like my summer neighbors who'd sold out, to forcibly displace them.

I checked my watch, jiggled my feet, bowed my head to my chest.

Who knows? I thought. The angry people may be right. The plan offered four alternatives. I'd read them several times, and I could not make sense of them. I did know this much: A whole lot of property—including our low ground—lay smack in the middle of the so-called channel migration zone, and the river was poised to reclaim it.

At the meeting, one man stood to say this:

"Remember this is Mother Nature. She might seem beautiful and docile, but really she's a bitch. You have to put her in her place, show her who's boss."

Chastise, he said, or maybe: Harness.

RECLAMATION III

I was down to one question. Just one. What is the dam good for? The answer did not seem obvious. At the Whiskeytown Visitor Center, three kiosk exhibits described the dam's construction, the miners and the gold rush, and the local large mammal populations. The books for sale featured photos of Indian basketry while others explained how to conserve water, identify birds, and recycle. The place felt like a kind of subsidized apology. But for what? Whatever it was remained unmentioned or unmentionable. I felt a little like I did when I watched age-appropriate sex education films as a kid: Yes, yes, but how does the sperm get to the egg?

I asked the volunteer ranger behind the desk the purpose of the dam.

"Flood control, irrigation, and electricity generation," she intoned.

But that is not what she wanted to talk about. She wanted

to tell me how she grew up here, and then moved to Santa Fe. Everyone moved on in those days, she said. No one stayed put. Now she's returned and she loves it, just loves it. She launched into stories about her uncle, a logger and mill hand, who had worked in nearby French Gulch, who hiked miles through pine forests for dances. He was mourned at his funeral by many Wintu, she said.

"What happened to the Wintu?" I asked.

"They moved on," she said. "They headed into the hills."

PRESERVATION

Locals had recommended that we attend karaoke night in French Gulch, but we'd opted for early sleep instead, so we decided to check out the place in daylight. I arrived to pick up Laurie at noon, and she climbed out of a vine-choked apple tree with a chainsaw and hopped in the car. The road weaved five miles up a wide valley, recently burned, thoroughly and hot. Only a few black snags remained, and the barren hills offered stark contrast to the dense green everywhere else: Manzanita and live oak, pines and laurel. French Gulch looked barren, denuded even, and not just the hills, the town as well. The sign on the lone saloon with the white-wood façade read: Closed. We were out of luck.

A man sat across the street in front of an unmarked building with a single door wearing a Santa hat.

"Where's Santa?" I asked.

"Not here," he said. "Nowhere near. You seen the bar?"

"It's closed," I said. I pointed to the large sign.

"Not that one," he said. "This one." He opened the door behind him.

Nearly all the stools in the place were empty, save those held by two morning drinkers, but nothing else was. Artifacts covered every wall. Laurie ordered two Budweisers, and the bartender, clean-cut in a polo shirt with a full head of gray hair and the dregs

of a healthy tan, pulled the beers in silence and turned back toward the wall-mounted TV, leaving us to gawk at the collection: cant hooks, gold nuggets on a scale, an artist's rendering of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. A wedding dress. Unfamiliar currency. All displayed like an orderly collage or layers of forest duff. Every museum I'd been to all week had seemed haphazard, incoherent, sometimes depressing. Not this.

When we ordered a second beer, the bartender tossed in a bag of Cheetos for free and started to talk. That wedding dress? A guy offered his wife 1200 dollars for it. She wouldn't take it. The ten dollar bill? That's from the National Bank of Lodi. The place had passed down through the women for 150 years—he married into the family—though not always as a bar. Used to be the general store. He pulled out hand ledgers with the cost for every item from 1865: whiskey 12 cents a shot, electricity 50 cents a month. He told his stories eagerly, almost greedily, and it was clear that he was the reason this place was so vibrant. Maybe to preserve something properly, I thought, you have to have something at stake, and when you *do* have something at stake—like us with our low ground, like our neighbors at the public meeting—maybe this was the answer: holding firm, hanging on, resisting the urge to move on.

"Which president is that?" I asked, pointing to the ten dollar bill. "Harrison? Van Buren?"

"That's me," said one of the morning drinkers. "When I was stuck in Lodi."

The bartender continued his tale. He came to town in the late 1940s to log, he said. His hob-nailed boots hung on the wall along with his falling axe. He once ran a chainsaw that weighed 100 pounds. Took two men to run it. Still, they cut more board feet in the old days with a hand saw.

"Why?" I asked.

"Bigger trees," he said. "Used to be three mills. Then we

ran out of trees.”

Our beers were drained, our fingers Cheeto-orange, and we didn't know what to say. I'd been so worried about what gets lost when we reclaim, when we start our infernal human meddling, that I never considered that maybe hanging on is worse. There's fear in preservation – fear of change, fear of loss – a kind of stasis that inevitably breeds sadness. Hanging on happens when there's not much left to hang onto.

We left a very large tip.

RECLAMATION IV

I had begun to suspect the truth, but I didn't want to face it. I read a book about Whiskeytown and gleaned this much: They dammed the Trinity River and reversed the entire flow into the Sacramento River drainage. The details of the construction were staggering, nearly awe-inspiring: eight miles of tunnels, 17.5 feet in diameter, 480,000 cubic yards of dirt to be excavated and relocated. The book offered plenty of specifics, a heavy dose of politics, and the answers to my question. Sort of. Whiskeytown dam generates 154 megawatts of power at one powerhouse, then another 180 megawatts later after it passes through the tunnel. That is, by hydropower standards in the Pacific Northwest, peanuts. None of the dams on the Columbia generates less than a thousand megawatts. Grand Coulee alone generates 7,000. Then, of course, there's also irrigation. The Central Valley Project. Back when I was a desert-bred teenager driving north to college, the lush green Sacramento Valley made me weep: rice paddies and almond groves and vineyards sandwiched between distant peaks, dewy and sweet. The book did not quantify how much of this could be attributed to Whiskeytown, but a Bureau of Reclamation website did. While over 300,000 acres are irrigated by the local behemoth, Shasta Dam, only 5,000 are irrigated by the entire Trinity River Diversion. For

that payoff they'd reverse a river?

RECREATION

Saturday. Laurie's day off. We met with old friends who lived nearby and took a long walk beside the Sacramento River. The air was balmy, the oak spackled hills green and shimmery in winter sun, everything as right as right could be. Still, I couldn't help but start in.

"But what's it for?"

My friend shrugged.

"Whiskeytown? That dam's for recreation."

"That's it. Recreation?"

"Of course," he said. "Who wouldn't want a lake in a valley that's over 100 degrees three months of the year?"

I was stunned. I'd deluded myself into believing that earnest reclaimers always have some decent purpose in mind, but that's the problem with reclaiming – isn't it? – the definition of a decent purpose is shifty. When President Kennedy dedicated the dam in September 1963, his rhetoric had that familiar moral tone.

"How great was the danger," Kennedy said, "that this great natural inheritance of ours given to us by nature, given to us by God, would be wiped away, the forests ruined, the streams destroyed, wasted for the people, water going to the sea unused."

In the same chapter where I found the quote was a picture of Kennedy feeding a deer.

We don't feed deer anymore, not at least while cameras are around, and we don't equate wild rivers with ruined forest. In 1963 everyone agreed that recreation opportunities more than justified the dam, and soon they had numbers to prove the point. The very first year one million people showed up.

All day I'd had Cat Stevens looping through my mind:
Morning has broken, Blackbird has spoken, God's re-creation of a new

day. Being re-created is cool. No doubt about it. But is it enough to justify turning a river around to make it go the other way, swamping a town and god knows how many archeological sites, spending several million dollars in tax money initially and plenty annually on upkeep?

RE-DEFINITION

I began a list of what gets reclaimed. Rivers. Swamps. Mines. Ball players. Some examples were easily categorized. A new dam in China without fish ladders: bad. An aging Philadelphia Eagles receiver showing unexpected speed: good. Some examples edged toward deception: grass seed pressure-sprayed atop flattened former mountaintops to mitigate mining or wetlands bulldozed into vacant lots to mitigate development. But some stories were inspirational, very nearly triumphant, and the best seemed to be a kind of re-reclaiming.

Like the Elwha dams, a half-state away from my home in Washington, which once reclaimed water for power generation, now slated to be the first major dams in the country to be demolished to allow the return of salmon critical to the ecosystem and the local tribe, if the hoopla surrounding the project was any indication, to our collective identity as half-decent stewards. The demolition was creating a kind of euphoria. And, of course, a ton of backlash.

My first grade teacher used to tell us that saying I'm sorry meant you'd pounded a nail into a tree and now you've pulled it out. The hole is still there. Even as a kid I thought: well, then maybe it's best to leave the nail in. That seemed the argument against taking out the Elwha, that the hole would still be there, that it would cost too much money, and maybe the entire deal would be for show.

Still it's better to say sorry than not to. As any first grader

can tell you.

Reclamation, I decided, comes down to three concepts: To take back. To make right. To make useful. Over the months that followed the trip to Whiskeytown, I'd look for stories where the three intersected. I'd start with dams: how and why they were built, how and why they were coming down, and how the dams that remained were getting reclaimed, too, in a way, to make them more right, more useful. And the more I'd look for stories, the more often I'd run into Native Americans.

Like the Wintu. Who did not, as the volunteer ranger had suggested, head for the hills.

The name Wintu, it turns out, is broad, encompassing bands that lived in much of Northern California. One of them, the Winnimem Wintu, decided to take salmon restoration in the nearby McCloud River into their own hands. In an attempt to find salmon eggs from a healthy thriving run, they traveled to New Zealand to a hatchery run by Maori. Their plan – to transport and transplant the fish – is complicated, especially since they'll have to navigate several federal, state, and local agencies. So the Wintu have work ahead of them, and whether they'll succeed is anybody's guess, but they're stubborn, and they're sure they're right.

RECLAMATION IV

One thing we should have known about Whiskeytown but did not: there's poison oak everywhere. Those vines Laurie had been sawing through? Yep. A month after our return, Laurie would require emergency room care and prednisone shots. It's a damned good thing, we'd agree, that she wasn't allowed to burn. Meanwhile, we'd head home before Christmas, trade rain for snow, Manzanita for buck brush, oak for fir. We'd drive over the passes, show up at a funeral, one of a half dozen friends dead from cancer in the past couple years, and return to home where the river, for now, ran low.

I'd pull the skis out of the garage where they hung from hooks we built in those early heady days, wedged behind a stovepipe that heated us when the garage doubled as a pool hall and a fan that cooled us and a shaggy shred of carpet Daisy used to climb to get above the fray. So much work, she seemed to think, what are you doing it for? The cat knew what we didn't. Now Daisy's gone, too. Two winters ago, we hacked her grave in the frozen ground. The high ground, not the low.

The temptation is always there, isn't it? To give up, to give in. Admit that what we do, even with the very best intentions, is often futile and sometimes worse than that. Wrong-minded. Harmful. Bad.

Until the need to make things right arises anew.

Our landless summer neighbors wrote in spring. They wanted to return to the valley and needed a place to camp and our deserted low ground was an obvious choice. So we started all over again: cleaning, watering, planting, reclaiming. We rigged up an outhouse with T1-11 scraps, a tarp, and an old pair of skis. We set up a campfire ring and set out some garbage cans. Our former neighbors, now neighbors again, set up a camper and a bug tent. We arrived for dinner with garden greens in paper towels and cut-flowers in beer cans as afternoon sun backlit the berry brambles. The low ground, for the first time in a decade, felt right.

This much I know, we all know: change will come hard and fast—natural disasters and government decisions, dams and oil wells, then small pox or cancer or a left turn in traffic—and someone somewhere will arrive to reclaim it all, to fill in the gaps. Strangers from over the hills or across the sea or, hell, a faraway galaxy. For now, we are the strangers. And while we're here, we

hang onto the remnants, protect the glassy stone chips just under the surface, replant and restore and rebuild. We can't help it. We're reclaimers by nature.

GWENDOLYN

In this dream, I'm sitting in the train station at York or Harrogate or some such place holed up in Costa for an impromptu picnic eating those raspberry biscuits they sell each spring, it's a rain and crumbles kind of day—conductors conducting, passengers passing—and all the while I'm reading some treatise on the state of the pound and trying to ignore how each person's bag falls open spilling out ratty socks and dull razors, lost keys and long-forgotten hair barrettes, tea-stained magazines and wrinkled letters lost to the bottom of bags now sprung open and dusting their contents down the platforms, and that's when I see you through the crowd wearing that dress you loved, the one I said looked like a pile of weeds uprooted, the green one you remember and the day you wore it, the picnic when you took off your mackintosh and we set ourselves down, never mind it was hunting season, and we laughed at the danger and we laughed at the squish of the ground and we laughed under the rain-washed ribbons and my hands undid your hair and sunk your hips into the loam-soft ground and it was our grand picnic until the shot and the doe who ran through the meadow blood smeared down her haunches and the doe is you and the doe is me and the doe is everyone running to catch a train and you are everyone running to catch a train and as you leave the station I see you moving away your bangs stuck to your forehead, sweating and ready to bolt.

JET SKIING

My friend Trevor died of leukemia six months ago. It was only eleven weeks between diagnosis and death. He was twenty-five. While he was being treated, I was invited by one of his friends to join a Facebook group dedicated to supporting him during his chemo. That was the first time I had heard he was dying. Trevor and I were Facebook friends mostly out of obligation; we hadn't spoken to each other since high school. I did not feel comfortable offering condolences on his wall, but I checked it daily to see how he was doing.

On September 3rd, the first day of Columbia's term, the posts started coming in. "R.I.P. Trevor." "You're in a better place." "You were so strong." "We'll miss you." A few hours later, Trevor appeared on his own wall with a post that said: "We regret to inform you that today, at eight in the morning, Trevor passed on to a better world – Jan". Jan was Trevor's mom. I did not go to the funeral.

Trevor and I grew up in the same neighborhood in rural Michigan. We were in the same grade, went to the same elementary school, played on the same t-ball teams. We weren't poor for the area; we both had nice houses. He had an above ground pool that his dad set up every May and took down in September. We spent a lot of time at his house, swimming, watching pro wrestling, building erector sets. At her request, I called his mom Jan. I was there so often, though, that on a few occasions I accidentally called her Mom. Afterward, I remember vividly feeling like I'd betrayed my own mother and that I'd somehow encroached on Trevor's family. I felt like I'd stepped over a line, as if I had used Trevor's toothbrush or went to the bathroom in his house with the door ajar.

By October, most of Trevor's final goodbyes had been posted. People had complimented the nice ceremony and wake. They'd written things they remembered about him: funny stories, things he had liked, things he had frequently said. I had initially

not wanted to post, but after he died, I thought it might be crass for me to not say anything, so I posted "I'll always remember our times biking to the woods and wrestling." I later reread the post and considered deleting it so no one would get the wrong idea about us. But wrestling in the woods was something we liked to do. We'd find a clearing, brush away any bramble or rocks or poking things and imagine we were wrestlers. I once threw him against a pine tree, and he punctured his cheek on a small protruding branch. I remember the way his cheek rose like a tent as he pulled his face from the tree, and the way it snapped back to place when it was free. In the hospital, we told Jan that he fell off his bike and landed on a stick. The injury left a circular scar that he mentioned negatively to me only once, in middle school, after we'd already gone our separate ways. He told me the scar had left him disillusioned, but at the time I'm not entirely sure either of us knew what that meant.

In late October, another group was made, this one called, simply, "R.I.P. Trevor Hatley." Now Trevor had three pages. This one was started by a girl named Sarah, a girl who, I figured out, was his fiancée at the time of diagnosis. She had started appearing in his profile pics a few years earlier. They had bought a house together, a one-bedroom in a new development. In the weeks before he died, they got married. She, like him, was from Northern Michigan, and, also like him, had never left. When Trevor friended me on Facebook so long ago, I read that he went to trade school, not college, and became an HVAC repairman. My reaction at the time was strong, and, retrospectively, shameful. I was disappointed he didn't move on with his life. I thought he was being lazy. I thought he was just playing around, that he was too smart to work as an HVAC repairman. While I toiled at school, he rode around on his jet skis. Sarah had been similarly unambitious. She, I found, had worked as a secretary at her dad's small company, and then

after getting serious with Trevor, got a job as a secretary where he worked. I've never met Sarah, so I can't speak of her potential, but I remember feeling that Trevor was squandering his.

But it was serendipitous that Trevor didn't go to college. If he had gone, he would have had, at most, three years of a professional life after he graduated. None, really, if he decided to get his master's. He had no student loans. He had no responsibilities. Before I knew he was sick I felt something like jealousy. Sometimes, I would look through the photos of the apartment he rented before he bought the house with Sarah. He had a big screen TV. He had what looked like a quality entertainment center. The apartment was clean and well furnished and had marble or faux marble countertops. He spent a lot of time at Torch Lake, boating and jet skiing. He could afford to throw extravagant parties at the beach. Until the summer he was on chemo, Trevor had been quite ripped from all the extra time he dedicated to the gym. I remember thinking, when looking at those pictures of him at the lake with his friends, that I'll have what he has ten times over once I'm out of school and established. Some people, I thought, seem to have things handed to them, while others have to struggle.

Trevor's birthday would have been in November, and when the day came, Facebook reminded me. A few people left him birthday wishes. I remember reading them the day they were posted and feeling embarrassed for the people who had posted them. They are still up, months later, which embarrasses me on a totally different level. I know Jan has access to his account, and I think it would be best if she closed it, or at least took down the birthday wishes and the posts from people who were hacked. Since he died, there have been two posts on his wall by clear Facebook account hacks. These seem even worse to me than the birthday wishes. It's like stepping on a grave.

I think I remember the moment our friendship started to

unravel. It was in our first year of middle school. We were in the same math class. We sat together every day, in the front row. But then one day I walked in, and he was already sitting at a table in the back with three other boys and no room for me. He looked at me standing in the doorway for a moment, then turned back to the boys. The word that kept circling in my head for weeks was 'betrayal.' Since his death, I've thought about this again and I think I went too far. I think it was a misdirection of ambition. I was already his friend. Trevor sat at the back table every day, until the boys got so rowdy and unmanageable that the teacher made a seating chart. She put Trevor and me next to each other, because she didn't think we were friends. We were quiet for a few days but then started talking again. A week later, the teacher redid the chart, and for the rest of the year we were separated.

We still hung out that year, but we found barriers to build. He began projects that were too complex and fragile to have me help with. Both of us lost interest in pro wrestling. He liked computers and things that blinked. I did track and soccer. My birthday is in May, and even though by the end of our first year of middle school we weren't speaking to each other much, I still invited him to my party. By that point, I had a whole new circle of friends, so the party was basically us and him. I'm sure we were clique-y and inside joke-y, but I do remember Trevor at the start of the party, in a conical hat, sitting at my dinner table laughing with the rest of us. Later, while we were supposed to be watching a movie, he sneaked out. I found him in my bedroom, still in the hat, sitting on my bed with the lights off. I took offense to this. I thought he was being snobby. Like all children, I thought he was out to ruin my party. I told him this, and left him there in the dark. Then I went outside and sulked in my parents' camper, face down on the beige and pungent mattress, and waited for Trevor, or anyone, to come and apologize to me. I waited for what seemed like an hour,

but was probably only five minutes, because when I finally came back to the movie, no one seemed to have noticed I was gone. Trevor was sitting cross-legged on the floor next to one of my new friends.

September was my first semester as a PhD candidate at Columbia. I don't blame Trevor's death for my difficulties and academic spottiness last fall, though it was certainly a contributing factor. I've lived in big cities before, but none like New York. To say that I needed to adjust to the pace would have been a stretch, but I had this weird drive, a drive to which I submitted almost daily, to explore every road, enter every shop, eat at every deli. I don't plan on staying in New York after I defend my thesis – I plan on moving on – so I think I felt that I needed to get as vivid an imprint of the city as I could before collecting my letters of rec and catching the last train out. I thought about Trevor a fair bit while walking the streets, but it strikes me as incidental to my desire to explore. In December, my adviser had a heart to heart with me about my progress, and she used the words 'unthorough' and 'undergraduate,' which left me dopey and shattered for weeks. When I returned to New York after Christmas break, I returned with a new resolve to stay stapled to my desk and focused. And I've been good since then. My progress is progressing.

Then, one morning, mid-March, Trevor posted on my wall. "Hey! I found the most ammazing site for hot singles! Click here to join with me." It's hard to say who to feel embarrassed for in a situation like that. The hackers just unleash their virus on Facebook and let it spread to any account it can, so it's not like they set out to hack the dead. Jan's not as forum savvy as someone mine and Trevor's age would be; she must have logged on as Trevor and clicked on one of the bad links, compromising his account. It was such a perplexing thing for me to see Trevor resurrected as a computer virus, but then with things like Gmail and Facebook and

OKCupid and match.com, it's become quite hard to really pack up and bury the dead.

That morning, after seeing Trevor's message, I fell into a Facebook loop. I went to Trevor's profile and clicked on a name on his friends list – a person I never met named Nate. I read Nate's profile and then clicked on one of the friends on his friends list. And so on. After awhile, I moved out of Michigan. Then out of America. I tried to find more exotic names, names of people from other countries. I went to France, then Japan, then back to France. I looked through the photo album of a Thai girl's trip to Australia. I skimmed the profiles of people from Russia. I went to Africa. I saw pictures from a costume party in Kumasi, Ghana. I saw pretty Cambodian girls with big earrings and high cheekbones. This whole Facebook loop cost me at least eight hours. I clicked on city names if they looked compelling. I went to India, but not China. American music is popular everywhere, it seems. I went to South America. I saw pictures of statues from Montevideo, Uruguay. I saw a Brazilian exec type behind her desk, who was friends with a woman with triplets from Nairobi. I went to the West Indies. And then to England, where I came to the profile of a man named Jeffrey. Facebook said we had one friend in common. I'm not sure how they knew each other, but there was my friend's profile pic. Him on a jet ski on Torch Lake, his new wife's arms wrapped around his chest, a rooster tail arching high behind them. They looked like they must have been going incredibly fast.

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